

The Japanese Lover Study Guide

The Japanese Lover by Isabel Allende

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Plot Summary

As penance for her life filled with material possessions and great wealth, the eccentric 80-year-old Alma Belasco decided to spend the rest of her days at Lark House, a senior retirement community, in the novel "The Japanese Lover" by Isabel Allende. Alma hired Irina, an employee at Lark House, as a secretary. Irina soon began helping Alma's grandson, Seth, compile a family history. The two soon discovered that Alma had a secret Japanese lover in her life.

It was only after Irina Bazili began working at the Lark House that she began to find peace in her life. She not only had her full time job but also worked part time for Alma helping that lady with chores she could no longer do and providing secretarial services. Irina additionally agreed to help Alma and her grandson, Seth, compile a family history. As the two got to know Alma's routine better, they noticed she received a box of flowers and a letter in a yellow envelope each week. She also took strange, often spur of the moment trips away from Lark House. The two believed Alma was meeting Ichimei Fukuda, a Japanese man with whom she'd been having an affair off and on all during her life.

Meanwhile, Seth fell in love with Irina, who was an emigrant from Moldova, but could not get her to return his affection. After Irina was visited at Lark House by an FBI agent, Catherine Hope confronted Irina about her haunting past. It was with Cathy's urging that Irina told Seth about the sexual abuse she'd received from her stepfather when she first came to America and the photos and videos that he'd sold of her.

After she'd lived at Lark House nearly three years, Alma's health began failing. She was having chest pains and often grew confused. This didn't stop her from taking one last trip. On the way home from her trip Alma crashed her car. She died of her injuries a few days later in the hospital. While Irina was sitting with Alma the last night of her life, Irina saw a Japanese man whom she believed was Ichimei come into the room. It was only later that Seth told Irina it couldn't have been him because Ichimei had died of a heart attack several years prior.

Through the course of the novel the author weaves the stories of the lives of Alma; Nathaniel, who was her cousin and later her husband; Ichimei; and Irina as those lives developed over nearly a century. Major themes in the story include social class, materialism and enduring love. The story also touches on World War II, the imprisonment of the Japanese Americans in America, homosexuality, interracial marriages, sexual abuse and its aftermath, emigration, abortion, generosity, affluence and the depravity of man.



Chapters 1-3

Summary

In Chapter 1, Irina Bazili did not dream she would find happiness and healing while working at Lark House, a residence for seniors with little money. During her interview with director Hans Voigt she told him she had experience working with elderly people from her childhood in Moldova. During a tour of the facilities, Voigt told Irina about two ghosts rumored to inhabit the grounds. They were a woman in pink who died of grief after her son, the second ghost, drowned in the swimming pool. From the time Irina began her work at Lark House she was attracted to Alma Belasco, a woman who lived independently there. Lupita, who was in charge of cleaning, did not think Alma would last long there.

In Chapter 2 Irina was pursued by Jacques “Frenchie” Devine. He gave her the present of a topaz and diamond scarab which Irina refused. The refusal sent Frenchie to the emergency ward of the hospital with high blood pressure. Irina took the scarab but turned it in to Voigt. She also gave Voigt the cash tip that Frenchie gave her a week later. Voigt returned it to Frenchie’s savings. Frenchie took two mysterious trips that left him exhausted. After the second trip he was found dead in his room. Frenchie’s family was angered when they learned Frenchie had modified his will to leave all of his possessions to Irina. Voigt was angry with Irina until her talked to her and realized she was unaware Frenchie had changed his will. She told him she did not want anything, the family could have it all. Because of her honesty Voigt gave Irina a higher salary and full time contract. The residents admired her.

In Chapter 3, Alma asked Irina to work for her as a secretary. Once they worked out the details and Irina lost her fear of Alma she began to get to know her. Alma didn’t appear to be sentimental or care for material possessions. The only person with whom she didn’t act aloof was with Seth, her grandson. Alma lived with a cat in one of the independent apartments. She was friends with Victor, the gardener, and Catherine Hope, who even Alma couldn’t resist friendship. She was also endeared to a girl named Kirsten who worked in Alma’s art studio. Kirsten had Down Syndrome. She was the only one who ever kissed or hugged Alma. Alma sold the silk screens she produced to raise funds for the Belasco Foundation. This foundation had been founded by her father-in-law to create green spaces in at-risk neighborhoods. It was Seth who helped Alma and Irina develop a friendship. Seth tried to seduce Irina even though she was not the type of girl he usually dated. She had nothing to do with him until he asked her help in compiling a history of his family and of San Fransisco. Alma laughed when she considered how her family would react if Seth and Irina were to get together. She set to work polishing the girl’s manners and exposing her to cultural events.



Analysis

Although several important themes are introduced in this opening section of the novel, the main plot doesn't really begin to develop in these three chapters of the novel. The information given in these chapters serves to set the stage for the coming action and introduce the main players. The two characters of major importance are Irina Bazili and Alma Belasco. Seth Belasco, Alma's grandson, is the third important character introduced in this section.

The theme of social class is discussed in this early section of the novel. Lark House is a residence for seniors who have little money. Because Alma Belasco came from a wealthy family and once oversaw her own successful business, it was unusual that she would make her home at Lark House. Notice Lupita's comment to Irina that she believed the Mercedes that dropped Alma off would one day return to pick her up indicates not only that Lupita believed Alma would not stay at Lark House but also that Alma had the means to live elsewhere. Also significant to the theme of social class is Alma's own reaction to the idea that her grandson, Seth, might get together with Irina. She laughed because the two were from differing social classes. Irina appears to be relatively poor with no relatives besides the grandparents with whom she lived in Moldova. The author slips in a variety of hints to let the reader know how poor Irina is. These include the mention of Irina buying her clothes at a second hand store and her need to work three jobs to make ends meet. In the same way, the author lets the reader know that Alma is well off. Mention is made of Alma's expensive though simple clothes as well as the luxury that Alma enjoyed because she was able to employ Irina as a secretary.

There are already hints dropped in this section that this story will be one in which the secrets of the main characters are uncovered. The opening sentence in the novel lets the reader know that Irina had suffered some terrible trial in her life from which she will heal during her time working at Lark House. The only hints given about Irina's past in this section of the novel are that she grew up with her grandparents in a very poor town filled with children and the elderly in Moldova. Notice when Voigt joked with Irina about the residents of Lark House fantasizing about killing a family member Irina acknowledged the same desire. The author's description that Voigt thought Irina was joking indicates that perhaps Irina really did have a family member she wanted to kill.

In the course of the novel Alma's true personality will come out. At this point in the novel, the reader assumes that Alma has always lived in wealth. It is also believed that she holds herself apart from others because she is haughty. Through the course of the novel, the reader will learn the secrets of Alma's past and the circumstances that had defined her personality.

Euthanasia is only briefly mentioned in this section, and then it is not called by its true name. Jacques Devine died suddenly at Lark House. He had been seen by his doctor only a day before. The doctor found no sign that Jacques had been on the brink of death and wanted an autopsy done to determine a cause of death. Because Jacques



was 90 years old, Voigt discouraged an autopsy. He believed the result of the autopsy might “sully Lark House’s impeccable reputation” (p. 150). It appears Voigt believed there might be some evidence found that Jacques had caused his own death. The idea that an elderly person had been able to kill himself, even if it was what that person wished, under supervision at Lark House was believed to be bad publicity for the senior residence. The employees at the residence would be criticized for not recognizing that Jacques was planning to do himself harm and the residence as a whole would get a reputation for allowing its residents to take their own lives.

Notice in this section of the novel the reference to the ghosts that some patients believed to inhabit Lark House. Keep in mind not only that the female ghost was one who was said to wear a pink gauze dress but also that Irina told Voigt without argument that she did not believe in ghosts. A sentence that soon follows this discussion of ghosts foreshadows a bit of information that will not be fully understood until the very conclusion of the novel. “She was to discover that many of the old folk were permanently accompanied by their dead” (p. 6). Notice also in the section that Isaac Belasco is referred to as Alma’s father-in-law.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way that Irina dealt with Jacques’ advances. How might she have handled the uncomfortable situation differently?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Irina’s personality as it has been presented thus far in the novel. Do you sense anything strange about her?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Alma as she has been presented so far in the novel. What are your first impressions of her?

Vocabulary

niche, nihilist, expeditions, myriad, ecumenical, tacit, magnate, sordid, negligent, lucid, clandestine, voluptuous, besotted, platonic, circumlocutions, missives, impeccable, codicil, vixen, cryptic, spartan, specter, enigmatic, patronizing, exorbitant, tacit, raucous, grandiose, delegate, garish



Chapters 4-5

Summary

In Chapter 4, after she'd worked for Alma for about a year Irina began to suspect that Alma had a lover. She thought it was the Japanese man whose picture was in a silver frame that Alma regularly polished. Irina also found another picture of Alma and the man, whom Alma said was Ichimei Fukuda, walking on a beach together. Irina believed that picture suggested love and sexual intimacy. Alma would often go away from Lark House and be gone for three or four days at a time. Irina noticed she was always happy when she returned from her secret trips. Seth had enlisted Irina in helping him discover where his grandmother was going by telling Irina her health could be in danger as she had high blood pressure and a bad heart.

Seth had told Irina that his grandmother had undergone a complete personality change in 2010 when she decided to go and live at Lark House. The change had taken place in the space of about two hours. She decided to par down her material possessions and move away from the family mansion. She told her daughter-in-law it was because she was old and crazy. Seth and Irina noticed that Alma received each week a box containing three gardenias as well as a yellow envelope. Irina could never find any evidence of the envelopes or what had been sent to Alma in them. This chapter ends with a letter that Ichimei wrote to Alma in 1996. He referred to a trip to Washington the two took together. He also asked if the cherry tree his father had planted at Sea Cliff still bloomed.

In Chapter 5, Alma told Seth and Irina about the first time she saw Ichimei. Alma was a girl from Poland who had been sent to live with her aunt and uncle. She often hid in the wardrobe in her room and cried. Three months before Alma had been sent away her older brother, Samuel, had been sent to England in case the rumors of war turned out to be true. They did not want him to join the army but despite their best efforts he chose to be a pilot with the Royal Air Force. When Alma arrived in California she clung to her cousin Nathaniel. Her Uncle Isaac tried to be an authoritarian but had a soft spot for Alma. He heard her crying at night and was upset by it. He thought her crying was a premonition of bad things to come. He discussed the matter with his wife. They were still trying to determine what should be done when they realized Alma had stopped crying at night.

Alma followed Nathaniel around hoping that he would replace her brother, Samuel. He'd discovered that Alma had been crying at night and had often joined her in the wardrobe to comfort her. He showed her a blooming cherry tree as a surprise and then introduced her to Takao Fukuda, the Japanese gardener at Sea Cliff. Takao showed her the garden and introduced her to his son, Ichimei. Alma spent the rest of the day following Ichimei around and learning from him.



Analysis

One thing to keep in mind about this novel is that it is not told in a linear fashion. The author bounces back and forth through about 80 years of Alma's life as she lays out the details of the lady's life and background. Alma met Ichimei about 75 years before the time she came to live in Lark House. Her parents had sent her to America to live with her aunt and uncle because they had heard rumors that a war might start soon in Europe. That war turned out to be World War II. Notice that when Alma's parents sent her away, she had the feeling that she would never see them again. When Isaac, who was Alma's uncle, heard her crying in her room at night, he believed it was a sign that Alma had a premonition that something bad was going to happen to her parents.

The beginning of Alma's friendship with Ichimei is described in this section of the novel. They met one another when they were eight years old. Ichimei was the son of the Japanese gardener at Sea Cliff. Also during this section of the novel the beginnings of Alma's life long relationship with Nathaniel is also described. Before she and her brother had both been forced to leave their parents' home, Alma and her brother, Samuel, had been very close. The fact that Alma threw her first temper tantrum when she learned she was going to be separated from her brother is evidence of the closeness of their relationship. When Alma arrived at Sea Cliff she made up her mind that Nathaniel would take the place of Samuel in her life. After he gave in to the idea that Alma wasn't going anywhere soon, Nathaniel began to develop a friendship with her. He was the one who eventually began going into her closet to comfort her when she cried at night.

In the theme of social class, the first thing the reader should notice about the relationship between Alma and Ichimei is that they were not of the same social class. Alma's aunt and uncle were affluent while Ichimei was the son of laborers. To make matters worse, he was the son of immigrants from Japan.

There are several things of note that the reader should keep in mind as they will surface later in the novel. First, note the description of Alma's smart car. Notice especially how the author hones in on how lightweight the car was. Alma had chosen this car so she would not hurt anyone if she hit them with it. On another line of thinking, remember Irina's response to Seth when he asked her how old people had sex. She responded that they took their time. This conversation will be important later in the novel.

Notice also the time lapse between the date of the letter Ichimei wrote to Alma and the present time in the novel. The letter is dated with the year of 1996. Since the reader knows that it was in 2010 that Alma decided to move to Lark House, it can be fairly certain that the letter from Ichimei that is included in Chapter 5 was at least 15 years old. A final thing to note in this section of the novel is the author's description of how Alma's letters arrived at Lark House. Seth and Irina had notice that Alma received a box containing three gardenias once a week as well as a letter enclosed in a yellow envelope. They realized a second envelope was inside the yellow envelope that was addressed to Alma's Sea Cliff address. No one at the house had any knowledge of any letters arriving for Alma or any recollection of forwarding any mail to Lark House.



Discussion Question 1

Why did Alma latch onto Nathaniel when she first arrived in California? At what point did he decide to return her affection?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss why the cherry tree was an important symbol in Alma and Ichimei's relationship?

Discussion Question 3

The author goes into great detail about the letters that Alma received at Lark House. Do you think the detail is significant? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

euphoria, autonomy, premonition, cloying, stevedores, assimilated, stoic, clemency, premonitory, vicissitudes



Chapters 6-8

Summary

In Chapter 6, Alma and Nathaniel entertained one another. They were especially fond of putting together and performing plays in the attic of the Sea Cliff house. Ichimei was put in charge of painting backdrops. Nathaniel's life changed when he began secondary school. He was small and enjoyed learning so he was bullied by the other students. Lillian tried to intervene but was told by the school's headmaster that he believed fighting was good for the boys. Ichimei stepped in by introducing his friend to martial arts. Isaac went to see Takao, who taught judo and karate, and signed Nathaniel up for classes. Nathaniel was never bullied again. Isaac expressed his thanks to Takao by having a wooden floor laid in the garage where Takao taught his classes.

Although Nathaniel no longer got beat up at school, none of the other boys liked him and he felt ugly. He told Alma he thought about killing himself but Alma told him his death would be a waste. In reality, Alma was more worried about her parents and her brother since World War II had begun in Europe. Because Nathaniel was so caught up in his own problems, Ichimei became Alma's closest companion. Isaac and Lillian learned from Alma's brother that their parents were among the Jews forced to live in the Warsaw ghetto. Isaac tried but was unable to rescue them.

In Chapter 7, Irina had become acquainted with Alma and her family through the photographs that she was supposed to sort and put in chronological order. The two had become like aunt and niece. Seth had suggested to his grandmother that as she grew older she might need to move back to Sea Cliff or hire full time help. Alma was irritated by his advice but Catherine Hope told her she shouldn't be offended by anyone's desire to help. The story detours to tell about the rock climbing accident that confined Catherine to a wheelchair and made her choose to live at Lark House for the help she needed in day-to-day activities. Since her time at Lark House, Cathy opened a free pain clinic. Meanwhile, Irina had found a sense of peace while working at Lark House even though she did still have problems. She was concerned most by Seth's advances. She'd grown to love the elderly people with whom she worked and enjoyed taking care of them. In the same sense, she enjoyed feeling as if she were being taken care of by Alma.

In Chapter 8, Alma went each Sunday to lunch at Sea Cliff. She and Seth began asking Irina to join them. The family had a bad habit of arguing over trivialities. Irina's presence at the table caused the family to act in a more civilized manner. Although Seth hoped to be Irina's lover, he had given in to a relationship like that between cousins because Irina insisted on moving at a snail's pace and would retreat if Seth tried to move too quickly. Seth had become a lawyer, as his family had expected him to do - but never dedicated himself to - his work. For this reason he was surprised how much work he put into the book he was putting together with Irina's help. When Seth would visit Alma she would tell stories about her childhood in Warsaw, her parents confinement to the ghetto, and



the death of Isaac Belasco. She told how Isaac's wife, Lillian, went blind after he died. She even talked about the Fukuda family and how they were evacuated from San Francisco during World War II.

Analysis

In this section of the novel the author gets a bit tied up in some side stories. She talks a good deal about the plays that Alma, Nathaniel and Ichimei would write and put on as children. She also talks a good deal about Nathaniel's troubles in his teen years and even tells a story of how Catherine Hope came to be bound to a wheelchair. Even with all of this background information, the author does still manage to address some of the important themes in the novel.

In the theme of secrets, notice how Nathaniel kept the troubles he had in secondary school to himself. He was embarrassed because he was so different from the other boys in his school and often didn't tell his parents about the troubles he was having in school. These differences Nathaniel noticed between himself and the other boys in his school will become significant later in the novel.

The idea that love can endure through a variety of difficulties is another theme touched on in this section of the novel. Notice that the roots of Alma's relationship with Ichimei as well as her relationship with Nathaniel are strengthened in this section of chapters. Nathaniel and Alma face some trials in their relationship because Nathaniel toyed with killing himself even though Alma thought his problems were trivial compared to those, like her family, who was being held in the Warsaw ghetto. While Nathaniel and Alma were struggling with their differences, Ichimei stepped forward and took over as Alma's confidante and comforter. The beginnings of an enduring love between Seth and Irina is also described in this section of the novel. Although Seth wanted more from Irina, he molded his love for her to be like that of a cousin. The author describes Seth as being both stubborn and infatuated with Irina, two aspects that kept him pursuing her even though she did not want to move a quickly toward a relationship as he did.

A final aspect of this section to note deals with the theme of materialism. Notice that even though the Mendels were wealthy, this wealth did not mean anything when the war began in Europe. Because they were Jews the Germans took their property and put them in a ghetto just like the other Jews.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that the author includes a description of Catherine Hope's accident? Why is this significant?



Discussion Question 2

How was the beginning of Seth and Irina's relationship like that between Alma and Nathaniel?

Discussion Question 3

What was Ichimei's role in this part of the novel?

Vocabulary

prodigious, camaraderie, ostracism, apocalyptic, furtive, requisitioned, atrocities, dowager, innocuous, idyllic, esoteric, pallid, avarice, imperious, improvised, enigmatic, impetuosity, prowess, cynical



Chapters 9-10

Summary

In Chapter 9, Takao Fukuda emigrated to America in 1912 after he discovered the religion of Oomoto. In his family tradition it was his place to take charge of the family's honor and pursue a military career but his new religion that encouraged peace was at odds with what his family expected of him. When he arrived in California Takao had a family photograph, two changes of clothes and his family's ancestral samurai sword. He became a gardener. In less than ten years he earned enough money to send for a wife from Japan. He chose the woman because he liked her name, Heideko. She turned out to be outspoken with a strong character. Ichimei was born the last of the couple's four children. He was premature and his parents did not name him because they were afraid he would not survive.

During the Great Depression Takao and his family were able to survive with the extra money he made from the Belascos, the first family to use his services when he began operating independently. As they worked on the garden together Isaac and Takao developed a respectful friendship. Isaac was in the process of helping Takao open his own business when Pearl Harbor was attacked and the Japanese were ordered to evacuate. Isaac insisted he be able to do something to help his friend. He agreed to allow Takao to bury his family's samurai sword in the Sea Cliff garden so it would be safe. Ichimei brought his cat, Neko, along when the family came to ceremoniously bury the sword. He asked Alma to care for it while he was gone.

In Chapter 10, the Fukudas were to go to a concentration camp called Topaz but because it wasn't ready, they spent six months at a racetrack that had been transformed into a makeshift camp. Isaac and Alma met the Fukudas just before they were getting on the bus to the camp. Isaac gave Takao an envelope of money. At the racetrack turned camp Heideko took charge of the family because Takao was tired and humiliated. She checked out the camp and had soon helped organize the refugees. They opened a school, provided sports for the children and practiced patience. When they were finally taken by train to Topaz, Heideko again helped the people to organize themselves. Ichimei convinced his father they could grow vegetables and soon encouraged him to begin planting again.

Alma and Ichimei did write to one another but Ichimei's letters were so heavily redacted that they were hard to read. The men set to read all the incoming and outgoing mail also could not keep up with their duties so it took long amounts of time for the children to get letters. Ichimei finally decided to draw pictures for Alma instead of writing. His pictures had no trouble getting through the censors. In a letter dated in 1986 Ichimei told Alma that not everything about the camp was bad. He remembered having turkey for Thanksgiving and decorations for Christmas. He said the members of his family who suffered the most were his father and his brother, James.



Analysis

The purpose of these two chapters is to explain the events that initially separated Ichimei and Alma. Information in the chapters also gives the reader an understanding of the relationship between the United States and the Japanese emigrants after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Even though the Japanese were seen as a threat to America's security, notice that Isaac Belasco did not believe Takao and his family represented any danger. He instead saw the evacuation for what it was, a parallel of what was happening to the Jews in Germany and the European countries. He believed that what was being done to his Japanese friend was the same thing that had been done to Alma's parents. Isaac was angry and ashamed of his country.

Despite the different classes from which the Fukuda family and the Belasco family came, they still developed deep friendships and had respect for one another. Because he was a first-generation emigrant from Japan, it was illegal for Takao to own property in his name. Isaac came up with a way that Takao could start a plant nursery on his own and reap the benefits of his hard work. The evacuation, however, put an end to this plan. Notice Isaac's continued loyalty to Takao evidenced by Isaac's act of allowing Takao to bury his family's samurai sword in the garden at Sea Cliff.

Although Alma and Ichimei are still children at this point in the novel, this background information on the treatment of the Japanese by the Americans helps the reader to understand how difficult a relationship would have been between the two of them when they got older. Despite their difficulties, however, the two children continued to communicate with each other through pictures and letters.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the similarities and differences between the United States' act of forcing the Japanese to live in concentration camps and the Jewish concentration camps.

Discussion Question 2

Why is it important that Isaac allowed Takao to bury his samurai sword in the Sea Cliff garden? Research what might have happened to Isaac if it were discovered that he had helped Takao in this way.

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the way that Takao and Heideko's personalities changed when they were being held in the camps.

Vocabulary

nostalgia, pragmatic, affront, impecunious, clandestine, altruistic, eclectic, subterfuges, rejuvenated, insatiable, exacerbated, repudiation, quagmire, rudimentary



Chapters 11-12

Summary

In Chapter 11, over lunch in Neiman Marcus on Union Square Alma told Irina about Nathaniel, her husband. She said he was as generous as his father, Isaac, had been before him. She and Irina began talking about the financial troubles of the seniors at Lark House. She told Irina she planned to help by arranging for the Belasco Foundation to take care of the grounds and parks so that money spent on those projects could be used to help the seniors who had trouble paying their medical bills.

Back at Lark House, Voigt was surprised Irina got such good performance reports from the residents. He did not realize she treated each person with the same respect she treated her grandparents in Moldova. She remembered how hard her grandparents had worked to feed the family. She knew she was the one reason her grandparents had kept working as hard as they did. Irina's mother had left Moldova, along with everyone else who could do so. Irina imagined she'd return one day bringing gifts for Irina. Her mother did eventually send her parents some money but made no mention of her daughter.

Irina had later learned that her mother had been told she could get a job as a waitress if she left Moldova. She instead was put in a brothel where she was kept prisoner for two years. She and some other girls were arrested after a fire destroyed the house in which they worked. A cop that Radmila knew helped her get a passport. She was able to get a legal job in Italy. She fell in love with an American technician who took her to live in Texas. In 1999 Irina left her grandparents to live with her mother and stepfather. Although Irina didn't learn until much later, her grandmother died only a few months after Irina left. Her grandfather hung himself. It was a judge in juvenile court who told Irina about the deaths of her grandparents.

When Lenny Beal came to live at Lark House, everyone wondered why he was there. He was 80 but seemed to be in good physical shape. The women spread rumors about the profession at which he had worked. Alma stopped the rumors when she told Irina to tell the women that Lenny had been a dentist. They had met thirty years before Lenny had come to Lark House. Seth had his investigators check out Lenny and told Irina what they'd found over dinner. Seth's father remembered seeing Lenny at Sea Cliff during Nathaniel's final illness and believed he had been friends with both Nathaniel and Alma. During the meal Seth also told Irina that Ichimei and his family had spent more than three years at a concentration camp in Utah. He showed her a picture of the family taken during that time.

In Chapter 12, Boyd Anderson, an American soldier, took the photograph of the Fukada family during their time at Topaz. He was in love with Megumi. Even though a love affair between the two was forbidden, Megumi felt the same way about Boyd. Charles was not in the photo that Boyd had taken. He had enlisted. When James, Ichimei's other older brother, turned 17 he was arrested because he'd answered "no" on some



questions given to the Japanese men on a questionnaire. It was understood even if their answers weren't true, the only acceptable answers were "yes." James was offended by the questionnaire because he was an American citizen. Regardless, he was deported back to Japan. Takado was highly embarrassed when James was arrested and refused to leave his room even for food. Heideko tried to keep her husband busy to keep him from thinking about what was happening.

Meanwhile, Megumi was seeing Boyd on the sly with help from her youngest brother and Frank Delillo, the doctor who had taken her on as an apprentice in the hospital. Ichimei continued to work with plants in the vegetable gardens. He practiced the Oomoto faith. Megumi, however, converted to Christianity. The priest guessed the reason Megumi converted and wondered where she and her American lover would be accepted.

Analysis

The reader learns a few more details about Irina's past in this section of the novel. It appears that whatever horrors haunt Irina, they are not associated with her childhood with her grandparents. She left her grandparents to live with her mother and stepfather in Texas. The next mention of her grandparents is when Irina learned they died from a judge in juvenile court. The reference to juvenile court helps the reader to understand that Irina must have done something serious or had something serious done to her in the years since she left her grandparents. Knowing that Irina left her grandparents and then later learned they died shortly after she left them helps the reader also to understand why Irina felt the need to care for other elderly people as if she were caring for her grandparents. Looking back, she wished she had the opportunity to care for them as they had cared for her.

The reader also gets some information about Irina's mother. She got pregnant by a Russian soldier and left Irina as soon as she was able. She was tricked and sold into prostitution instead of being given the waitressing job she was promised when she left Moldova. It was by pure luck that she was able to get out of prostitution and get a legal job. It is described how Irina's mother told Irina about her past when she was drunk on vodka. The references to the woman make it appear even after her daughter came to Texas to live with her, Radmila was not a good mother and was more interested in drinking.

Even though Alma had been living at Lark House for several years, she is surprised when she learned how hard some of the other seniors worked to pay their bills and still afford medications and doctor care. In the theme of social class, it was when Alma mentioned to Irina that she had never had to worry about money that Irina made her aware of how those she lived with on a day-to-day basis had to struggle to get their basic needs. Alma, perhaps as generous as her late husband and father-in-law finds a way to help those people through the Belasco Foundation. Notice also Irina's surprise at the costs of dinner at a restaurant to which she and Seth had gone to eat. She mentioned to him that their meal would cost more than a wheelchair. Seth doesn't



understand her line of thought until she explained to him there were ladies at Lark House that needed wheelchairs but couldn't afford them.

In the theme of enduring love notice that Alma told Irina that she had kept the memory of Nathaniel, her late husband, alive over three decades. Even though Seth and Irina believed Alma was having an affair with another man, it appeared Alma had also deeply loved the man who was both her husband and her cousin. This certain knowledge that Alma did wind up marrying Nathaniel makes the reader wonder how the two got together.

Another enduring love introduced in this section of the novel is the love between Megumi and the American soldier Boyd Anderson. Although the two had fallen in love with each other note that the mixing of races was forbidden from the viewpoint of the Americans. The author describes this mixing as being "repugnant" for the Japanese a word choice that indicates the relationship between the two would have been seen as offensive. Regardless, the two found ways to be together. The author notes that the priest who gave Megumi his blessing when she converted to Christianity saw the real reason behind the conversion and wondered where Megumi and her American lover could go to live that they would find a community that would accept them. As proof of Boyd's undying love for Megumi, notice that he cut out her image from that of her family in the portrait that he took of them. He kept this picture with him in his wallet all of his life. He was even buried with it.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Megumi's desire to be a doctor. What factors worked against her dream? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Why was Alma so blind to the needs around her? Why do you think she was so surprised to learn about the needs of the other residents at Lark House?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss what has been learned about Irina's background thus far. How did her relationship with her grandparents help her to be a better worker at Lark House?

Vocabulary

obsequious, lugubrious, minuscule, moribund, extolling, intermediary, assiduous, repugnant, subversive, rancor



Chapters 13-15

Summary

In Chapter 13, just a few days before the Japanese were released from the concentration camps by the order of the United States Supreme Court, Takao and Heideko Fukuda were present as their son, Charles, was honored in a military funeral service for Charles. The United States had taken everything away from Takao including the older son who was supposed to care for his family when Takao no longer could. Even after his family was allowed to leave the concentration camp Takao had an attitude of frozen indifference. Although the laws keeping Megumi and Boyd from marrying had been abolished Megumi felt she couldn't deal this final blow to her father. Megumi was also still working toward her dream of becoming a doctor. Ichimei was enrolled in secondary school. The first time he was physically attacked by a bully Ichimei used his martial arts skills. He was never touched again.

A letter dated in 2005 detailed how Ichimei went to see his secondary school principal on her ninety-fifth birthday. He was surprised she still remembered him. He apologized to Alma for not being able to find any gardenias to send her.

In Chapter 14, even though Isaac and Lillian knew that Samuel's plane had been shot down and suspected her parents were dead, they didn't tell Alma. Alma tried to stay quiet to keep her aunt and uncle from knowing the emotional turmoil inside her. During those times she and Nathaniel would comfort each other. He was counting the days until he could go study law at Harvard. When he did leave to go to school Alma counted him as one more person who had abandoned her.

By the time Alma finished secondary school she'd lost contact with Ichimei even though she still wrote her diary as if she were writing to him. Lillian tried to get Alma married but Alma sabotaged all of her aunt's plans. She was finally allowed to go to a girls school in Boston. Nathaniel met her at the airport. Alma was lost her first three months of college because she'd always had people before who had organized her life for her. Nathaniel tried to help her with her budget but she still overspent. The winter in Boston was almost more than Alma could handle and she had just about decided to go back to Sea Cliff when she was introduced to Vera Neumann and her work. She decided to make her designs more refined than Vera's without heeding to popular culture. Her designs became so exclusive that even Lillian's friends were desirous of them.

In Chapter 15, when Alma called Nathaniel to make the family's travel arrangements for her graduation she mentioned to him that she believed someone was spying on her. A man with a foreign accent had called her apartment a couple of times. He'd also asked her friends about her. The Friday before her graduation she was drunk and high on cocaine. She'd been dropped off at her dorm at 3 a.m. and had thrown up before she could make it inside. A man grabbed her calling her by name and telling her that she



should be ashamed of herself. She woke in the back seat of a car. A man brought her coffee and aspirin. He told her that he was her brother.

Years prior Isaac had gotten proof that Samuel's plane was shot down. He, Alma and Lillian had made a trip to the village in France where they believed Samuel was killed to put up a memorial plate in his memory. Samuel told her that he must have been thrown out of the plane when it crashed and was caught dangling in the trees. When one body was found, search crews stopped looking not realizing they'd found only the copilot. Samuel was rescued by members of the resistance who put him in the care of a Jewish group while he recuperated. Samuel couldn't remember where he was from and chose the name Jean Valjean for himself. He wound up being imprisoned in the concentration camp Auschwitz which he survived.

Samuel did not learn his identity until he impregnated a friend. She insisted that he learn who he really was so the baby would know its background. She worked back through Samuel's history to help him discover his true identity. He told her that his son was now four. He hadn't contacted Alma earlier because he knew he was nothing like the brother she remembered. She was also the only living family member besides his parents that Baruj had.

Analysis

The first of several twists is introduced in this section of the novel as Alma learned that her brother, whom she believed was killed in World War II, was still alive. When the reader first learns that a strange man has been asking about Alma there is a hope that it might be Ichimei. Although there is some disappointment when the reader realizes it isn't Alma's great love who has come seeking her out this disappointment fades when it is learned the man is instead the brother whom she believed was dead.

Besides the discovery that Alma's brother is alive this part of the novel seems to drag a bit as it gives background information on Alma's time in college and her decision to create silk screen art as a career. Significant to the theme of social class is how lost Alma was when she first tried to live on her own. She'd always had other people around to organize her life for her, and she had no idea how to go about doing this on her own. Also, when Alma tried to live on a budget she was constantly broke because she wanted to go on with the same style of life she'd enjoyed in California. Nathaniel tried to help her understand the difference between wants and needs but she still had trouble maintaining a budget.

In the theme of enduring love notice that although she had not heard from Ichimei in eight years, Alma still believed that she would marry him. Her aunt tried to set Alma up with prospective husbands but Alma found ways to sabotage her aunt's efforts. Notice in this section Alma's suggestion to Nathaniel that they pretend to be a couple so that other boys would leave her alone while she waited for Ichimei. In a second love story unfolding in the book notice that Boyd has made a life in Hawaii in hopes that Megumi will agree to come live with him there. Although it was no longer illegal for them to marry



or live together, Megumi was aware what the knowledge of her relationship with an American would do to her father. She also still hoped to become a doctor, a goal she hoped to reach before getting married. Even though they were forced to wait, the love between these two stayed strong, just like Alma's love for Ichimei.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you think that Takao refused to become an American citizen? What statement was he making?

Discussion Question 2

Why would it have been so traumatic to Takao for Megumi to marry her American soldier?

Discussion Question 3

What did it mean for Alma that her brother was still alive? Discuss the circumstances under which he'd been presumed dead.

Vocabulary

vanquished, pittance, benefactor, mensch, tenacity, sabotaged, bohemian, eccentric, disheveled, pilgrimage, convalescence, insatiable, melodramatic, tenacity



Chapters 16-18

Summary

In Chapter 16, as Takao lay dying of lung cancer he asked his son to have Kemi Morita, the Oomoto spiritual leader, come to him. After praying over him, Kemi told the rest of the family that Takao's ancestors were waiting to guide him to the other side. He gave Ichimei through the priestess. He said the Fukuda family sword was still buried in the garden at Sea Cliff. It was now Ichimei's responsibility to go, dig it up and see that it was placed on the altar of the family's ancestors.

When she returned home to Sea Cliff Alma felt out of place. Isaac was ailing after a heart attack. Lillian had begun putting together recipes to strengthen him and going to all of his doctors appointments. He received a burst of energy when Alma returned home. He had always had a soft spot for her. From the time she'd come to live at Sea Cliff Isaac had enjoyed protecting the girl and challenging her intellect. She had helped him create his plans for the Belasco Foundation.

One day after she arrived, Isaac mentioned to Alma that Ichimei had contacted him recently for a meeting. Alma asked to be there when he arrived. Her hug almost knocked him over. Isaac saw Alma kiss Ichimei on the mouth but pretended not to have. When Alma brought Ichimei to Isaac and left the two of them alone Ichimei told Isaac about his father's death. Isaac knew the dire situation in which Ichimei's family was living and had already arranged for the purchase of property so Ichimei could start a plant nursery. He told the boy he still had the property from the arrangement he'd made with Ichimei's father. Ichimei and his family took charge of the property and worked hard to develop the business. Megumi, however, left the family business to study nursing in hopes of becoming a midwife. Boyd continued to woo her. In a letter written in the year of 2005 Ichimei told Alma that Megumi was retiring after having helped to deliver 5,500 babies. He mentioned that Megumi was a widow but doesn't say to whom she was married.

It was in Chapter 17 that Alma and Ichimei began their affair meeting almost daily at a motel. Nathaniel was the only member of the family who knew about the affair. He did not approve.

In Chapter 18, Lenny and Alma spent almost all their time together once he moved into Lark House. Irina felt Alma was disregarding her but Seth said Irina was imagining it. One day while washing Lenny's dog Sophia Irina eavesdropped on a conversation between Lenny and Alma. Alma told Lenny she'd decided to move to Lark House as a penance for her years of affluent living. She also admitted she was getting to know herself without all of her ornaments. When he told her she looked young, she said it was because of love and told Lenny she was seeing Ichimei. She said she married Nathaniel because he wanted to protect her and because she needed protection. Lenny asked to be allowed to meet Ichimei but she said their relationship was a secret because she



didn't want to hurt Ichimei's wife, children and grandchildren. Alma admitted she didn't have the courage to start a relationship with Ichimei when she was younger.

During their conversation Lenny admitted to Alma that he had an inoperable brain tumor and had only six good months to live. He has decided to kill himself before his symptoms get bad. At the conclusion of the chapter Lenny asked Alma if she would be with him when it came time to end his life.

Analysis

Several significant things happen in this section of the novel. First, Alma learned that Lenny was dying. He had come to her hoping that she would aid in his suicide before he became too sick to enjoy life. Irina also learned in this same conversation on which she eavesdropped that it was Ichimei whom Alma was seeing. Notice Alma's comment to Lenny that she hoped when it was her time to die that Ichimei would be with her or that Nathaniel would come and seek her out. Although Alma claims not to believe in an afterlife, this comment is significant and will be revisited later in the novel.

In the theme of secrets, notice that ever since Alma reunited with Ichimei after she graduated from college, she had been trying to keep their relationship a secret. Unbeknownst to her, her uncle had seen the way that Alma greeted Ichimei and suspected that she was in love with him. Note also that the author is careful to point out that even though he was close friend with Takao and the Fukuda family, and considered himself a progressive thinker, he would not have been able to accept the relationship between Alma and Ichimei. Notice also that Alma told Lenny she wanted her relationship with Ichimei to remain a secret because she didn't want to hurt his family.

Another secret that came to light in this section of the novel is the fact that Lenny is dying of a brain tumor. He had omitted this information on his application papers for Lark House because he knew they wouldn't take him if they had known he had a fatal illness. He planned to kill himself before his symptoms got too bad and wanted Alma's help.

Lenny's intent to kill himself before his disease became debilitating reintroduces the theme of euthanasia. The reader learns that Irina and Alma had talked about this type of death before and that Alma found nothing wrong with it. She believed it was more cruel to make a person live in pain or with a failing mind than to allow them to kill themselves. It was also noted that euthanasia was a topic discussed often by the residents. Although she did not plan to orchestrate her own death, Catherine Hope had arranged for several of the patients living there to have the supplies they needed for a painless death.

Irina also learned while eavesdropping on Alma and Lenny that Alma had moved to Lark House as a sort of penance. She told Lenny that it was a way to pay for the lifestyle that she had always enjoyed. She also told him she was finding it very useful to get to know herself without her ornaments. Notice in this section of the novel, and in the other



sections that describe Alma's childhood and young adulthood, they describe a woman very different from the Alma who lived at Lark House.

When reading this section of the novel one should also consider the structure of the novel. After several of the chapters, the author includes a letter written to Alma from Ichimei. In the letter following Chapter 16 notice that Ichimei updated Alma on his sister's career. It is through the inclusion of this letter that not only Alma but also the reader learns that Megumi did go on to get her education so she could help deliver babies. The reader also learns that Megumi got married and had children and grandchildren. The author, however, does not name Megumi's husband, leaving the reader in suspense.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Nathaniel and Ichimei.

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way Alma has changed through the course of the novel. Has your opinion of her changed? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Alma's claim that she didn't want information about her affair with Ichimei to get out because she didn't want to hurt his family.

Vocabulary

superfluous, esoteric, fetishes, prudent, languor, incessant, bucolic, transcend



Chapters 19-20

Summary

In Chapter 19, Alma never mentioned Ichimei to Seth while she was recounting her life to him. Meanwhile, Irina found peace in delving into Alma's memories other than her own. Alma knew she was becoming older. There were things she could no longer do on her own. Although there were few pictures that featured Alma, an exhibition of Nathaniel's photographs of her was opened at a prestigious art gallery. The pictures were taken during an eight-year span between 1977 and 1983. The woman that Irina saw in the photographs scared her. Seth took her hand and she let him hold it. The woman working at the gallery did not recognize Alma as being the woman in the photographs.

Irina took Alma to see the movie "Lincoln" for a second time. They'd had to leave the first time they went to see it because Alma had a stabbing pain in her heart. Back at Lark House, Catherine Hope had advised Alma she needed to see a cardiologist. Alma had decided to spend the next day in bed with directions for Irina to make her get up the following day. After they returned from seeing the entire movie, Irina noticed for the first time how much weight Alma had lost and how haggard she looked. Alma had believed she would live until she was 90 but recently she believed death was hanging around her apartment. One day she remarked to Irina she saw Nathaniel's silhouette in a shadow on her wall. She confided to Irina that she hadn't loved Nathaniel as much as he deserved.

In Chapter 20 an FBI agent came to Lark House to visit Irina. The agent, Ron Wilkins had not been to see Irina since she'd started her new job. He told her that he had good news for her but called her Elisabeta. She asked him to call her Irina, the name he'd helped her pick out. He told her a new rule that had been passed allowed victims like Irina to be compensated. Irina told him she'd decided she wasn't going to be a victim forever and believed there was only one man who had hurt her and that he had nothing. Irina took Wilkins card even though she had no desire to go back to court. Later that day Cathy called Irina to talk to her in the library. She asked Irina who Wilkins was and didn't believe her when she said he was just a friend. She told Irina it was important to talk about the things that had happened to her as it would help to free her from the demons of her past.

Cathy was telling Irina the same thing that Irina's psychologist had told her about a decade prior. Instead of listening to her, Irina had chosen to run away. She kept running until she believed she'd found a sort of safety at Lark House. Now Catherine Hope was challenging Irina again not to run from her pain.

When Irina was ten her mother wrote her grandparents a letter saying she was afraid Irina would get involved in sex trafficking like she had. Her husband had agreed to sponsor Irina's emigration to the United States. She made promises to Irina to



encourage the girl to leave for her grandparents. It took two years for Irina's visa to come through. Irina got to America alone even though she did not know any English. She waited at the airport four hours for her mother and stepfather to pick her up. She remembered they both smelled like alcohol. Their house seemed luxurious to Irina. Her stepfather told her about rules that he expected her to follow. Her mother pretended not to know about these rules until Wilkins knocked at their door one day.

Analysis

The exhibition of photographs taken of Alma by Nathaniel seems out of place in this section of the novel. Of course it may just be a nod toward the high social status that the Belasco family enjoyed. They were the first ones able to purchase the best photography equipment because they had the money to do so. Had Nathaniel not been head of the Belasco Foundation the photos might never have been brought to anyone's attention. Another aspect of this exhibition that seems strange is that the Belasco Foundation was involved in creating gardens. The reader must wonder how this collection of photographs became part of a foundation that dealt primarily with gardens.

In this section of the novel the reader learns more about Irina's background. Although her mother and stepfather were the ones who suggested she come to America it appears they had something to do with the trauma that she suffered. One hint that her mother and stepfather were not going to be the best parents for Irina were that they showed up at the airport late and drunk.

Also in the theme of secrets notice that a reason is given why Alma chose not to talk about Ichimei. "The one thing she never talked about was Ichimei, unaware that behind her back Irina and Seth were investigating this most precious and secret aspect of her existence, the one thing she could not reveal, because if she did Ichimei would vanish, and with him her only reason to continue living" (p. 178). This quote is significant because it can be read two ways. Alma may not want anyone to find out about Ichimei because she is afraid that if anyone were to find out they were still seeing one another he would stop the affair to keep his wife and family from finding out about it. The other way the quote can be interpreted is the one that is actually correct. Alma is keeping Ichimei alive in her memory and reliving their love. If she were to tell Seth and Irina about him she would have to admit he had died earlier and her feelings of having a secret affair would vanish.

In the theme of enduring love notice the discussion between Irina and Alma about guardian angels. In this instance, Alma saw a shadow on the wall that she remarked looked like Nathaniel's silhouette. She quickly defended herself, telling Irina that she was not crazy, but did believe that the man who was both her husband and her cousin served as her guardian angel. Although she knew she was lucky because of the way that Nathaniel had loved her, Alma told Irina that she did not believe that she had loved Nathaniel as well as she should have.



Notice in this section that there is an emphasis put on Alma's failing health. She was having chest pains and her mind was beginning to wander. Irina had been coming to keep an eye on her in the morning while she was showering. Also notice that the author points out that Alma's driving, which had already been described as being bad, had gotten worse.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the significance of the exhibition of photos that Nathaniel had taken of Alma. Why do you think this exhibition was included in the novel?

Discussion Question 2

What does it say about Irina that she refused any compensation that might have been due to her from her past?

Discussion Question 3

Do you think that Irina will take Catherine Hope's advice and talk about what happened to her? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

evocative, symbiosis, ethereal, reticence, usurped, telepathic, insidious, indomitable



Chapters 21- 22

Summary

In Chapter 21, Irina had persuaded Alma to be the leader of a Letting Go Group at Lark House. Alma was late for the first meeting. Irina went to Alma's apartment to find a note saying she'd be away for a few days and asking Irina to take care of her cat. Seth invited Irina to eat sushi with him that night. Irina told him she'd determined from Alma's credit card statements that Alma went to a guesthouse in Point Reyes when she went away on her trips. Seth shared with her that had asked his father about Ichimei. Larry remembered he'd come to the house to work on the garden. Even though his father was well versed in plants, Larry remembered he'd left the direction of the garden work to Alma. Larry also told Seth that Ichimei had an aura, a circle of light around his head, and could control his pulse rate and body temperature.

A letter written by Ichimei interrupts the story. Ichimei described how Isaac had sensed he was near the end of his life and had called Ichimei telling him it was time to recover the sword.

Seth had too much sake with his sushi and was unable to ride his motorbike home. He asked if he could stay the night with Irina. She agreed because she was concerned for his safety but felt ashamed of the dirty, run down house in which she lived. He commented on the condition of the house, calling it a pigsty. When Irina woke in the morning, Seth was gone.

In Chapter 22, Neko had not eaten in three days and Irina had not heard from Alma. When Seth showed up at Irina's room, she asked him to take them to the vet. The vet said the cat had an intestinal blockage. Seth paid the deposit the vet wanted to do the surgery. As they sat at a cafe Seth decided it was time to take a small step forward with Irina. He told her that she could come live with him where she'd have her own room and bathroom in exchange for her helping him work on his book. He told her that even Alma had suggested the arrangement as it would give them time to grow accustomed to one another before they got married. Irina went to see the apartment but asked Seth to get her home because she thought she had the flu. He told her that she was going to stay with him. Irina went to sleep on the couch. When she woke Seth told her that the vet had removed the cat's obstruction but found a tumor in his spleen. He put Irina to bed because she had a fever. Seth was gone when she woke in the morning but he'd left her food and a note telling her that Alma had returned to Lark House.

All day long Seth was afraid Irina would leave his apartment. When he returned that night, he could tell she was still there. For the first time she went to him when he opened his arms for a hug. She told him they needed to talk. She'd decided to take Catherine Hope's advice and tell Seth the truth about her past.



Agent Wilkins had been working in the late part of 2000 to track down a girl who he was afraid was dead because she had suffered such cruel treatment. Photos of her were circulating widely among child pornographers. The code name for this child was Alice. It was not until November of 2002 that Wilkins arrived at the home where “Alice” lived. Irina opened the door. Wilkins recognized her immediately. After asking “Alice” how old she was Wilkins asked to speak to her mother alone. Radmila insisted that her daughter hear whatever was being said. Wilkins put the pictures he had of “Alice” on the table.

Irina thought how her stepfather had made her play what he called games with him on the promise that he would send the money she earned to her grandparents. He’d told her the photos he took and videos he’d made were private. It was not until she saw the photos that she realized he’d been sending the photos out through the Internet. Irina had locked herself in her room, afraid her stepfather would come home and kill her. Her mother began to beat her but Wilkins soon put an end to that when he arrested Radmila and had Irina taken to a psychiatric hospital. It took Wilkins four years but he found Robyns where he had fled to Jamaica after Radmila warned him what had happened. It was at this point in her life that Irina learned her grandparents were dead and that her stepfather hadn’t sent money like he’d promised her.

Seth tried to persuade Irina that he loved her despite her past. He told her that his parents would accept her and come to love her as well. She told him she preferred to be alone. Since she’d been rescued by Wilkins no one had touched her in a sexual nature. He told her they would take it slowly and do whatever it took, including going to therapy.

Analysis

The story reaches a climax in this section as the reader learns Irina’s secret about her past. Remember, however, that even though the reader knows what happened to Irina, Seth still does not know what happened. He was at a loss as to why Irina would have nightmares bad enough that she would need the man who lived next door to her to wake her up from them. The reader, however, does understand why Irina is so hesitant about a relationship with Seth. She had trusted her stepfather and he had terribly burned her trust. It will take a very patient, very dedicated man to be able to win Irina’s trust back.

When Irina does share with Seth the story of what happened to her, notice how the author presents this information. The circumstances aren’t presented as if Irina were telling Seth, but instead there is a flashback to the day that Agent Wilkins came to Irina’s home in Dallas. When the flashback ends it does so in such an abrupt fashion that the reader is jerked back into the “present” with Irina in Seth’s apartment.

In the theme of materialism Irina set Alma up as the leader of a Letting Go Group to help the residents learn how to let go of their material possessions. “Irina when she realized how anxious those Lark House residents who clung to their possessions were compared to those who had less (p. 199). Irina chose Alma as the leader of the group



because the older woman had given up so many of her things. She believed the other residents could stand to learn some lessons from Alma.

Notice in this section of the novel that Ichimei's letter interrupts the chapter. Right after Seth shared with Irina his father's memories of Ichimei and the family legend about the Japanese people coming to dig up the sword that had been buried in the Sea Cliff garden. This letter details, in Ichimei's words what happened on the day the sword was dug up. Notice that Ichimei mentions that Alma was not at home the day that the sword was dug up. He suspected that Isaac had arranged for her to be away.

Notice also in this section Seth's reaction to the place where Irina lived. Although it was the only type of apartment Irina could afford and she felt lucky to have it, Seth saw it was a pigsty. On the other hand, Irina thought Seth's apartment was nice but didn't look like home. When Seth mentioned to Irina that she must be poorer than he imagined, She told him that most everyone was poorer than the Belascos.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way that Seth reacted to Irina's rented room. Based on the description do you think the room was truly that bad or do you think Seth overreacted?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Alma's absence at Sea Cliff the day that Ichimei and his relative came to dig up the sword. Do you think that Isaac purposefully planned for Alma to be away that day?

Discussion Question 3

Now that you know what happened to Irina in her past, do you understand better her behavior in earlier parts of the novel? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

punctuality, deduced, astute, osmosis, contrite, visceral, ludicrous, incredulously, malignant, depravity, exploitation, impunity, collaboration, precedent, pedophiles



Chapters 23- 24

Summary

In Chapter 23, although Alma had thought she was infertile, she got pregnant by Ichimei during their meetings in 1955. She turned to Nathaniel for help. She couldn't tell Ichimei about the pregnancy because he would insist on marrying her and she didn't think she could stand the lifestyle their marriage would impose on her. She wanted Nathaniel to accompany her to Tijuana where she could get an abortion for \$100. Nathaniel agreed to go with her but once he saw the abortion would take place in a house with no antiseptic and a man who didn't appear to be a doctor doing the procedure he refused to let Alma follow through with her plan. It was at this time in her life that Alma had to face the reality of who she was. She broke off the relationship with Ichimei. She knew if she told him she was pregnant she would have to reveal her real self to him.

A letter from Ichimei dated in 1969 described to Alma how confused he had been when she left him with no good reason. He calmed down after his first trip to Japan. He invited her to keep their love in a bubble, that way it was protected from the troubles of real life.

In Chapter 24, Isaac had persuaded the priest to marry Alma and Nathaniel even though the religious man had his misgivings because the two were cousins. He was happy the two were getting married unlike his daughters who wanted to tell others that Alma had been adopted and Lillian who reminded Isaac that incestual relationships could produce children with birth defects. During their two-week honeymoon to Europe, the couple remained chaste. On their wedding night Alma told Nathaniel he could divorce her as soon as the baby was born. Nathaniel promised he'd love the child and raise it as his own even if it had Asian features. Alma tried to promise him she'd never see Ichimei again but Nathaniel warned her against making a promise she couldn't keep.

After their honeymoon was over Isaac insisted Alma and Nathaniel live at Sea Cliff. They slept in separate bedrooms, however, Nathaniel was attentive to Alma and her needs. Lillian mentioned to Alma she'd noticed the lack of passion in the relationship. Meanwhile, Megumi told Ichimei about Alma's marriage to Nathaniel. Ichimei wondered how he could have missed Alma's intent to marry someone else during the time of their affair. He soon believed that he had not missed anything. Heideko decided to take Ichimei back to Japan and find him a wife. Heideko left Ichimei alone with his father's ashes once they reached Japan. He pilgrimaged through the country spreading the ashes and distancing himself from his memories of Alma.

Analysis

Alma made a major comment concerning a common misconception about the differences between people of different social classes. Alma had incorrectly believed



that because she was of a more affluent social class she would be immune to getting pregnant out of wedlock, a problem that she saw as being associated with people of less fortunate social classes. A quote in the novel indicates that Alma had thought “accidents like that happened to women from another class without education or resources” (p. 224). Alma didn’t realize it was not a matter of education or resources, but instead the proper use of this education and resources as well as the use of birth control.

In the theme of secrets, the reader learns another major secret that Alma had hidden. During her affair with Ichimei she got pregnant. She’d intended to have an abortion but Nathaniel would not let her go through with it and decided instead it would be best to marry her. Notice that even though Alma told Irina how much Nathaniel loved her and how she felt she hadn’t loved him enough, the marriage was actually one of convenience. Nathaniel married Alma to keep her from being embarrassed by having a baby out of wedlock.

Touching on the themes of both enduring love and materialism notice that even though Alma had always said she planned to marry Ichimei, when she had an opportunity to do so, even though it was a bad one, she refused to do so. When she thought about the sort of life she would live with Ichimei, she realized she would not have the material wealth that she had as a Belasco. Even though she loved Ichimei because he was gentle and kind, she couldn’t understand his lack of desire to do no better for himself than just making enough to get by. Even though Alma believed her love was enduring, she realized that she loved her material possessions more. Even though she was ashamed of herself and knew how shallow she seemed, Alma could not help but choose her possessions over Ichimei.

Discussion Question 1

How do you think Ichimei would have felt if he had known how Alma felt about marrying him? Why did Alma decide not to ever tell Ichimei about the pregnancy?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Alma think that having a baby out of wedlock was a symptom of poverty?

Discussion Question 3

How did Ichimei’s trip to Japan help him to recover from his break up with Alma?

Vocabulary

mausoleum, tacitly, sordid, gesticulated, mollify, capricious, amorous, ardent, mendicant



Chapters 25- 27

Summary

In Chapter 25, along with being weaker, Alma felt her cat's absence deeply. Neko had been her companion for 18 years. Lenny expressed his concern but Alma downplayed her ailments. Irina and Seth noticed that Alma had stopped receiving the weekly gardenias at the time she needed them most. Alma was weaker than ever and becoming more easily confused. Despite the fact she had spells of racing heartbeats, Alma refused to go to the cardiologist as Cathy had suggested. She was not afraid of death. She'd lost that fear when she helped Nathaniel die. The only person she really missed out of her family was Nathaniel. The time finally came that she had to close her painting studio. Kirsten was taken on as an assistant in Catherine Hope's pain clinic.

In Chapter 26, Seth brought his grandmother three gardenias in memory of Neko. He took the chance to ask her why she wasn't getting flowers from Ichimei any longer. Alma was angry with Seth for nosing into her business but Seth promised her he wouldn't tell anyone. He begged her to tell him the whole story. She asked him to call for Irina so she could hear the story as well. When she received the text, Irina was in a meeting discussing the rights patients had to elective death. One of the residents who was dying with cancer had received a package from Thailand containing a substance that would kill that patient. Irina was particularly disturbed by the conversation because she had been the one in charge of comforting Neko while the vet put him to sleep. Voigt wanted his workers to discourage any attempts at euthanasia.

When Irina arrived at Alma's apartment, Alma began her story from the time she left her parents at the dock at Danzig. She included the first time she met Nathaniel as well as the first time she saw Ichimei. She talked for hours telling them about the brief period of physical love that they had shared before she was married to Nathaniel as well as the reason why she married her cousin. Seth asked if he was really a Belasco to which Alma replied he would have Asian features if he wasn't. She assured him that he was a Belasco.

In Chapter 27, Nathaniel's family looked forward to the birth of Alma's baby because it would be their first grandchild to carry on the Belasco name. Alma, however, put on too much weight and struggled with high blood pressure and headaches. When she first felt the baby move inside her she fell in love with it. She and Nathaniel continued to live as best friends. Alma told him he was welcome to have an affair. She asked only that he keep it secret.

When the family was at its Lake Tahoe cabin, Alma grew confused and had a seizure. Isaac, Lillian and Nathaniel didn't recognize that Alma was suffering with eclampsia. They took her to a local clinic but the doctor there had no knowledge of obstetrics. With snow and icy roads it took an ambulance seven hours to get to Alma. The baby's heartbeat stopped shortly after Alma was finally examined by an obstetrician. Nathaniel



was the only member of the family who saw the baby boy. He cried not only for Alma and her baby but also for himself and all that he had lost in his life.

Several months after Alma lost her baby Nathaniel took her on a two-month trip to Europe. They began having sex during that trip but only when they were drunk. When they returned home, Alma began work on her silk screens in the San Francisco workshop. The married relationship they had developed overseas dissolved once they were back in America. Alma, however, was pregnant again. Although he'd been fading, Isaac revived when Larry was born. Because she felt her son had no real love for her, Alma began to travel during the time of his childhood.

Analysis

Two secrets being kept by Alma are discussed in this section of the novel. One of the secrets that Alma kept was resolved to a certain extent in this section of the novel. The reader has to have wondered what would have happened had Alma carried her baby to term and it had been born with Japanese features. There would have been no way for Alma to deny to Ichimei that it was his child if it had Japanese features. Nathaniel's family would also have had questions if the baby had looked Japanese. When Alma mentioned this to Nathaniel he said only that Ichimei was the only one who had the right to ask about the baby's nationality. When Alma developed eclampsia and her baby died in vitro it destroyed Alma emotionally because she had become so deeply connected with the baby when she first felt it moving in her belly.

It was Seth who confronted Alma about the second secret mentioned in this section of the novel. Seth and Irina had noticed that Alma was receiving a box of gardenias and a letter each week. It was when Alma seemed to need to be cheered up the most that she stopped getting the flowers. It is important to notice that the time that Alma stopped getting the flowers delivered was the same time that she was not getting out of her apartment at all. Alma finally agreed to tell Seth and Irina about Ichimei. She even talked about the baby that she lost.

In the topic of euthanasia, Lenny reminded Alma of her promise to him when she began feeling so bad. He told her that she had to outlive him. Alma reminded him that even if she were gone, Cathy would help him end his life. It was almost as if she had thought through her answer. Notice also in this section of the novel that it is mentioned that Alma lost her fear of death when she helped Nathaniel kill himself. Meanwhile, however, in a meeting between workers at Lark House, Voigt had told his workers that they were in no way to encourage the seniors to kill themselves. He believed that such deaths, even if they relieved a person from suffering would put a black mark on the facility's reputation.

Notice in this section that the ghost, Emily, with her pink veils is seen as a figure of death. Some of the residents believe that this woman was responsible for taking the sickest clients and those in the most pain out of their suffering. It was considered a premonition of death if a patient saw the pink veils.



Discussion Question 1

Do you agree with Voigt's opinion of euthanasia? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Are you surprised that Alma's baby by Ichimei died in vitro? How might the outcome of the story had been different if the baby had survived?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Emily and her pink veils as a precursor of death.

Vocabulary

cataclysm, gregarious, escapade, anchorite, decrepitude, hypothetical, fulsome, carnal



Chapter 28-30

Summary

In Chapter 28, the day after Isaac had taken 4-year-old Larry on a trip to the Golden Gate Park the boy found Isaac sprawled on the bathroom floor. He was dead. In therapy later, Larry told his therapist his discovery of his grandfather was the most significant one in his childhood. It marked the end of the happiest years of his childhood. Even though she went blind shortly after Isaac's death, Lillian still gave Larry her unconditional love.

Alma saw Ichimei again at Isaac's funeral. Ichimei introduced his wife, Delphine, to Alma. Alma waited two weeks, hoping Ichimei would reach out to her. She drove by the nursery once but couldn't bring herself to stop. Finally, she called the nursery. She hung up when Delphine answered. She called several more times. On her final call Delphine called her by name asking how she could help her. Three days later she got a letter from Ichimei. The letter was informative only. Alma took it as Ichimei's polite way of saying goodbye.

In the next seven years Alma and Nathaniel continued the same friendly relationship. Larry grew up well. He was so good his parents often joked he would become a mass murderer to make up for his goodness as a child. Alma had some affairs and assumed Nathaniel did as well. She could still not get Ichimei out of her mind. This chapter concludes with a letter from Ichimei written in 1978. In the letter he asked why people fought so hard to keep their youth, something they were going to lose regardless.

In Chapter 29, Alma and her brother met up again in Paris in 1967. They had developed a relationship through the exchange of letters. Alma showed Samuel that plaque that she and her aunt and uncle had put up in his memory. A smaller plaque had been added by the grandfather of the caretaker. The grandfather had been in the resistance but Samuel did not recognize his name. Alma and Samuel visited the grandfather at his house and learned they knew people in common. Samuel told how he had come to survive his imprisonment at Auschwitz. After their visit in Paris, Alma and Samuel went to Warsaw but the only mentions they could find of their parents was on a list of victims from Treblinka. They visited Auschwitz where Samuel told his sister he believed even the best of humans could act like a psychopath. He knew that even of himself.

In Chapter 30, Nathaniel's illness caused him to be fatigued and easily confused. He began to lose weight. Just like her Aunt Lillian had done with Isaac, Alma began looking for ways to help her husband put on weight and improve his health. When he began to have ulcers on his skin Nathaniel's doctor referred him to an oncologist. Alma stopped working and traveling to care for him. She even stopped seeing Ichimei. A letter written by Ichimei interrupts this section of the novel. In this letter, written in 1984, Ichimei told Alma how much he missed her.



As Alma and Nathaniel spent their time together, Alma discovered both of them crying before she even realized what was happening. She recognized that her husband was dying. He told her that he knew she'd been seeing Ichimei. He decided it was time to tell her about Lenny Beal who had been his partner for eight years. He'd discovered homosexuality while he was studying at Harvard. He'd met Lenny in 1976. They had a secret studio they rented together. They went sailing together. That night after Nathaniel went to sleep Alma called Lenny and asked him to come. After that Lenny visited the mansion on a daily basis. The other family members and staff were told that Lenny was a nurse. Alma and Lenny knew that Nathaniel was suffering with AIDS but everyone else was told that he had cancer. Nathaniel thanked Alma and Lenny when nine months later they begged him to allow them to stop his pain.

It was only during their Lark House years that Lenny told Alma that Nathaniel had suggested to Lenny that he marry Alma once she was a widow. He hadn't wanted to leave her unprotected. As they walked back to their rooms, Alma mentioned to Lenny that she saw a glimpse of a pink veil in the woods outside the window.

Analysis

Nathaniel shares several secrets with Alma in this section of the novel. Even as close as they were, Alma didn't pick up on the fact that Nathaniel was homosexual. It was not until he was dying that he told Alma about Lenny, the man who had been his lover for more than 20 years. Alma had told Nathaniel several times that he was welcome to have other lovers. She asked him only that he be discreet. It appears that Nathaniel was so discreet that Alma never guessed what was going on with her husband. After she did learn the identity of Nathaniel's lover and their deep love for one another, Alma invited Lenny to come and help her care for Nathaniel in his last days. Another secret kept by Nathaniel and Alma during his last days was that he was dying of AIDS, a disease sometimes spread by homosexual sex. Nathaniel's family members and friends were told that he had cancer.

It is also in this section of the novel that the reader learns why Lenny and Alma were so close and why Lenny felt comfortable asking Alma to help him die when the time came. When Alma and Lenny had asked Nathaniel about ending his own life he was so grateful that he thanked them.

Even though Alma had ended her relationship with Ichimei suddenly and without giving him any reason why she was leaving him, he was willing to go back with her when they met up years later. Notice that when Alma met Delphine, Ichimei's wife, that woman looked at Alma as if she suspected her importance in Ichimei's life.

Out of the blues in this section of the novel, the author includes a description of Samuel and Alma's trip to Paris. This is one of several circumlocutions that the author takes in the novel that are loosely tied to the main plot of the story but seem as if they could easily had been trimmed out without having taken anything from the integrity of the story.



Discussion Question 1

Alma believed that Delphine had not told Ichimei that she had called the nursery. Do you think she was correct or did Ichimei just not mention the call in his letter?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the author included Alma and Samuel's trip to Paris in the novel? What does it add to the story?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Alma's infatuation with Ichimei's wife. Why did she continue to call the nursery even though Delphine answered the phone each time?

Vocabulary

cosseted, cortege, viscerally, penultimate, taciturn, assignation, arbitrator, implacable, nascent, illicit, lucidity



Chapter 31

Summary

In Chapter 31, Irina went to Alma's apartment to discover that the older lady had disappeared on one of her strange trips. This time Irina noticed that Alma had taken Ichimei's photo with her. The next morning Larry Belasco called to tell Seth that Alma had flipped her car down an embankment. She was in intensive care with fatal injuries. While the family discussed what should be done Irina went to talk to Alma. Alma asked for Kirsten and requested the family not try to save her life with an operation. Irina sat with Alma the third night in the hospital. The ward grew quiet. Alma had earlier asked Irina to put some lipstick on her because Ichimei would be coming. Irina was awoken by Alma's moan when Ichimei bent over her. Irina left them alone for their final goodbye. When the nurse came for the next set of rounds, the room was empty even though Irina had waited by the door to see when Ichimei left.

The family went through the traditional Jewish funeral and time of mourning for Alma. Seth and Irina were surprised that Ichimei did not appear to visit during the time of shiva. Irina grieved a second time as she cleaned out Alma's apartment at Lark House. She found Alma's picture of Ichimei in the bag the woman had always taken on her trips. The glass was broken and a letter that must have been stowed behind the picture fell into her lap. Kirsten pushed open the door of Alma's apartment. When Irina told Kirsten Alma wouldn't be coming back Kirsten left to get something. She came back with her backpack and handed it to Irina. It contained the letters from Ichimei.

At Seth's apartment that night Irina greeted him with a kiss. She had Ichimei's letters spread out over the island in the kitchen. As they looked through the letters Irina told Seth there weren't any letters past one written in January of 2010. She wondered where the letters Alma had received at Lark House were. Seth explained to her that Alma had sent herself the old letters to relive her affair with Ichimei. Seth had decided that day to look up Ichimei. He'd gone to the nursery which was being run by Peter, one of Ichimei's sons. He also met Ichimei's widow, who told him that Ichimei had died of a heart attack in 2010. In his letter dated January of 2010 Ichimei told Alma that if he were to die in the next three days he would do nothing different but put away everything except love.

Analysis

It is unusual in this section of the novel that after building up Alma's increasing weakness and sickness, she suddenly seemed to have improved enough that Seth and Irina both felt comfortable when she disappeared again on one of her trips. They believed she would be with Ichimei and that she would be okay. Alma, however, had a car wreck. Her wreck makes the reader wonder if her wreck were intentional. Was she trying to kill herself or was the accident unintentional? There are factors given in the course of the novel that lead the reader to believe that the wreck was unintentional. For



instance, the author stresses in several places that Alma was a bad driver. Alma had also been suffering from chest pains for which she had not been treated. It was possible that she had a heart episode while driving, causing her wreck. On the other hand, it is also noted that Alma was terribly afraid of losing her independence. She did not want to move to second level at Lark House because she felt like she would have not privacy. She also did not want to move back home to Sea Cliff.

The final secret about Alma and Ichimei's relationship is unveiled in this section of the novel. Ichimei died three years before Alma's death. It was apparently when Alma received the news that Ichimei was death that Alma decided to move to Lark House. She had decided to try to follow Ichimei's own desires which he had outlined to her in his final letter. He told her that if he knew he would die in three days, he would change nothing about his life. When Alma had considered this same proposition, she decided there were things that she wanted to change about her life. She decided to immerse herself in Ichimei's love by rereading all of the letters that he had sent her and by taking trips to relive the love they had shared together.

In the theme of enduring love, Ichimei's visit to Alma's hospital room is significant. Remember that Irina believed Ichimei was still alive. She was not surprised to see him in Alma's hospital room and thought nothing of it. In fact, Alma had asked Irina to put some lipstick on her because Ichimei would be coming to visit her later. When Ichimei entered the room, notice that Irina decided to give the two some time alone. The next morning when the nurse entered Alma's room to check her, Irina was surprised Ichimei was not there because she had not seen him leave the room.

Discussion Question 1

Based on the letter that Ichimei wrote to Alma, do you understand why she chose to go and live at Lark House? What was she trying to do?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Alma's car wreck was intentional or accidental? Give reasons to support your answer.

Discussion Question 3

Consider Irina's belief that it might help her if she were to watch the videos that her stepfather had made she would be able to heal from her trauma. Seth did not agree with her. Who do you think was right? Why?

Vocabulary

lethargy, entice, pious, seclusion, posthumous, escapades



Characters

Alma Mendel Belasco

Alma Belasco is the main character of this novel. Alma was sent from her family's home in Warsaw to live with her aunt and uncle in California when Alma's parents began hearing rumors there would be a war fought in Europe. Alma latched onto Nathaniel when he and his parents met her boat at the dock. The two soon formed a close friendship. Alma also became close friends with Ichimei, the son of the Japanese man who tended the garden at Sea Cliff. During the years that Ichimei and his family were imprisoned at Topaz, a concentration camp for Japanese Americans, Ichimei and Alma kept in touch with one another through letters. After she graduated from secondary school in California, Alma went to college in Boston. She'd almost given up on her secondary education when she decided she wanted a career in art. The week that she was to graduate from school Alma got a visit from her brother, Samuel Mandel, who was believed to have died in combat.

After college Alma went back to California and had almost decided she needed to go to New York to start her silk screen business when her path crossed with Ichimei. They began having an affair which Alma ended when she got pregnant. She did not want to tell Ichimei about the baby because she knew he'd want to marry her. She didn't believe she could stand the pauper's life that she would have with Ichimei. Alma planned to abort the baby and had Nathaniel accompany her to her appointment in Tijuana. When Nathaniel saw the man who was going to perform the procedure was not a doctor and did not have antiseptic he told Alma that she was not going to have the abortion. He would marry her and give the baby his name. Alma told Nathaniel that he was free to divorce her as soon as the baby was born. Alma suffered eclampsia during her fifth month of pregnancy and the baby died. During a trip he hoped would cheer Alma up from the loss of the baby Alma and Nathaniel came as close to living with one another like a married couple as they did through their entire marriage. It was during this time that Alma got pregnant with their son, Larry.

Alma met up with Ichimei at an orchid show and the two began seeing one another again even though Ichimei was also married at this time. Nathaniel got sick with AIDS and Alma learned her husband was homosexual. She called his lover, Larry Beal, to help her care for him during his last months. In 2010 Alma received a final letter from Ichimei and decided to move into Lark House. She believed she was punishing herself for living a life of privilege and materialistic riches. She'd also just received a letter from Ichimei telling her that if he had only a few days left to live that he would change nothing about his life. He told her he would empty himself of everything but love. Alma tried to follow in this advice given by her lover as she mailed his letters back to herself so she could enjoy them again and even went on trips to reminisce about her relationship with Ichimei. Alma died at the age of 82 from injuries sustained when her car rolled down a cliff.



Irina Bazili aka Elisabeta

Irina Bazili is one of the major characters in this novel. Her mother had become pregnant by a Russian soldier who passed through the area of Moldova and gave birth to Irina, whose birth name was Elisabeta. Irina's mother left Moldova believing she could get a job. She left Irina to stay with her grandparents. Until she was 12 Irina lived with her grandparents in Moldova.

When she was 12 Irina went to live with her mother and stepfather in Texas. Irina's stepfather spent the next three years sexually abusing her and selling pornographic photos and videos of her. She was taken from her mother and stepfather by the FBI when an agent linked the photographs with Irina's Dallas home.

Eight years after Irina was taken from her mother and stepfather Irina got a job at Lark House where Alma Belasco lived. Alma asked Irina to work as her secretary and the two developed a friendship. Irina helped Seth, Alma's grandson, investigate the strange trips that Alma made. Working together they learned that Alma had a Japanese man who was her lover during most of her life. After Alma had a car wreck from which she suffered fatal injuries Irina believed she saw Ichimei visit Alma in the hospital one night before her death. It was only after Seth learned that Ichimei had died three years before his grandmother died that Irina realized she could not have really seen the man.

Through the course of the novel Irina tried to keep the secret of the sexual abuse she'd received a secret. She told Seth about what had happened to her only after Catherine Hope, a doctor who lived at Lark House, advised her that it would be beneficial. Although Irina was afraid he wouldn't accept her after he learned what happened, Seth promised Irina they could take their relationship slow.

Irina worked well at Lark House because she imagined each of the elderly people with whom she worked being her grandparents. She felt a great deal of grief and guilt because she believed she'd abandoned her grandparents after all they had done for her. It was not until after she was taken from her mother that Irina had learned from a judge that her grandmother had died just a few months after Irina left. Believing he had nothing to live for, her grandfather had hung himself.

Isaac Belasco

It was Isaac Belasco who initiated the friendship between the Fukuda family and the Belasco family when he hired Takao to help him create the gardens at Sea Cliff. The men developed a deep and respectful friendship while they researched and planned the garden. Isaac was so impressed with Takao's work that he was in the process of helping him begin his own plant nursery business. Although Takao could not own property in his name Isaac planned to operate the business in his name until Takao's oldest American born son could put it in his name. When Takao and his family were given orders to evacuate to a concentration camp Isaac sought them out to give them money for the



trip. He also allowed Takao to bury his family's ancestral samurai sword in his garden so that it would not be confiscated by the United States government.

When Alma came to live with the Belascos, Isaac developed a soft spot in his heart for her. He felt responsible for protecting the girl. He taught her about gardening and together the two of them laid out plans for the Belasco Foundation. It was her idea to use the funds raised by the foundation for gardens and public green spaces. When Ichimei came to see Isaac about his father's sword, Isaac witnessed the passionate kiss that Alma gave Ichimei. Even though Isaac accepted the Japanese as friends, he could not have accepted a marriage between Alma and Ichimei. Isaac arranged for Alma to be away from home on the day that Ichimei and his family came to retrieve the sword. Isaac was secretly happy when Alma and Nathaniel got married.

Samuel Mandel aka Jean Valjean

Samuel Mandel was Alma's brother. The two were close as children and developed a relationship later when they rediscovered each other as adults. Samuel had been sent by his parents to study in England to keep him from signing up for military service especially since they believed a war was inevitable. Despite this attempt to keep their son out of danger's way Samuel joined the Royal Air Force in England. His plane was shot down over a village near Paris and it was believed he was dead.

In reality, however, Samuel survived the crash. He was not found by enemy forces because they stopped looking for survivors once they found the body of the pilot. Samuel was rescued and cared for by members of the resistance. He had a head injury and couldn't remember his past or his identity. He took the name of Jean Valjean for himself.

His girlfriend helped Samuel discover his real identity. Samuel contacted Alma just before her college graduation to tell her that he was still alive and that she had a nephew. They later visited Warsaw together to try to find some information about the ends of their parents' lives.

Lawrence "Larry" Franklin Belasco

Lawrence Franklin Belasco was the name of the baby born to Alma and Nathaniel Belasco. Even from the beginning, his name was shortened to Larry. Larry was adored by his grandparents and called them mama and papa while he called his own parents by the formal titles of mother and father. When Larry was four he discovered the dead body of his grandfather, Isaac, in the bathroom. He later told his counselor this was the most significant event of his life as he believed it signaled the end of his childhood. It was later when his father, Nathaniel, died that Larry believed he was fully catapulted into adulthood. In his childhood and adolescence, Larry was such a well behaved and docile child that his parents joked that one day he would horrify them by turning into a mass murderer. Larry was the father of Seth and Pauline.



Ichimei Fukuda

Ichimei Fukuda was the youngest son of Takao and Heideko Fukuda. He was a friend to Alma when she first came to live at Sea Cliff. Later, the two had affairs off and on through the rest of their lives. Ichimei was described as being a soft spoken man who had a green thumb. Even Alma's son, Larry, said that he believed that Ichimei had an aura. Alma got pregnant by Ichimei but he was never told about the pregnancy. The baby did not survive because Alma suffered eclampsia in her fifth month of pregnancy. Alma and Ichimei met up again during an orchid show and began their relationship again even though Ichimei was married by that time. Ichimei wrote letters to Alma through the course of their affair and sent her gardenias.

Dr. Catherine Hope

Dr. Catherine Hope was the youngest resident at Lark House. She was paralyzed in a climbing accident. Even though she was in daily pain and had to have help with even the simplest activities Catherine Hope enjoyed and treasured her life. She stayed busy by operating a free pain clinic at Lark House. Even though euthanasia wasn't a choice that Catherine believed she would make for herself, patients at Lark House knew that Catherine could get them what they needed if they wanted to be relieved of their painful lives. Because of the hope that Cathy brought to so many of the residents and staff at Lark House her surname is appropriate. Cathy also brought hope to Irina by insisting that she talk to Seth about her sexual abuse.

Heideko Fukuda

Heideko Fukuda is the woman who became Takao's wife after he sent for her from Japan. He chose his wife because he liked her name. The two had never met before. When she arrived, Takao discovered she was not as soft spoken as the match maker had described her as being. Her forceful personality was a benefit when the family was imprisoned in Topaz because she was able to help organize the people and encourage peaceful living. Heideko was very unhappy when Megumi married Boyd Anderson, who had been a soldier tasked with guarding the camp at Topaz. Heideko referred to him as the white devil and would not even speak to him until he and Megumi had their first baby whom they named Charles after Heideko's first born son.

Radmila Robyns

Radmila Robyns is Irina's birth mother. Radmila left her daughter with her parents when she was offered a job as a waitress. Instead of getting a job as a waitress, however, Radmila wound up working as a prostitute. When the building in which she and some other girls worked caught fire Radmila was arrested and a policeman helped her get a passport. She finally found a job in Italy in a factory. While working there she met Jim Robyns who took her to America to live with him. Radmila wrote to her parents telling



them that she wanted Irina to come live with her because she was afraid Irina would get involved in prostitution the same way she did if she stayed in Moldova.

Lillian Belasco

Lillian Belasco is Isaac's wife. It was she and her husband who agreed to take Alma in order to keep her safe from the war in Europe. As Lillian aged, she became deaf. When her husband became sick, she did everything she could think of to help him improve his strength. After he died, she became blind. No cause of her blindness was ever discovered. Through the course of Alma and Nathaniel's marriage Lillian constantly worried because she saw no evidence of passion in their relationship. She compared their relationship to her own with Isaac. Even though she was his grandmother, Lillian was always mama to Larry, the son of Alma and Nathaniel.

Seth Belasco

Seth Belasco was Alma's grandson. He seemed to be one of the few relatives she liked. When Irina began working for Alma Seth came to visit his grandmother more often because he liked Irina. He also became involved in helping his grandmother compile a history of the family because he wanted to spend more time with Irina. Seth eventually persuaded Irina to move in with him and tell her about the abuse that had made her so afraid to be dependent on other people. It was Seth who went to see the Fukudas at the nursery and learned that Ichimei had died in 2010, the same year his grandmother moved to Lark House.

Hans Voigt

Hans Voigt was the director of Lark House. Although Irina had no formal experience working with elderly people Voigt agreed to give her a chance at a job. When he realized how maturely Irina handled the advances that Jacques Devine made toward her Voigt gave Irina a full time position and a raise. He was tasked with trying to stretch the funds allowed Lark House as far as possible. Voigt was very much against euthanasia. He even went to the point of encouraging deaths at Lark House not be investigated so that no one could accuse the workers at Lark House of encouraging suicide.

Takao Fukuda

Takao Fukuda was the father of Ichimei, Charles, James and Megumi Fukuda. He emigrated to California because he did not want to continue in his family's tradition of military service. He instead chose to practice the peaceful Oomoto religion. He was the one who initiated the Fukuda family's friendship with the Belasco family. Before Takao and his family were sent to the concentration camps Takao helped Isaac Belasco create



a lavish garden at his Sea Cliff mansion. Isaac was in the process of helping Takao start his own business when Takao and his family received orders to evacuate.

Lenny Beal

Lenny Beal was the man with whom Nathaniel Belasco had a homosexual affair. After Alma learned about Lenny she invited him to come and stay with her and Nathaniel during Nathaniel's last days. After Lenny was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor he moved to Lark House. He and Alma reignited their friendship. He asked Alma to help him put an end to his life when his symptoms became bad enough that he could no longer enjoy his life.

Jacques “Frenchie” Devine

Jacques “Frenchie” Devine was the resident of Lark House who developed a crush on Irina. Jacques gave her a piece of jewelry and cash, each of which she arranged to get returned to him. Before he died Jacques changed his will to give everything to Irina. Irina refused to take any of Jacques things and told Voigt she had no idea that Jacques had changed his will.

Kirsten

Kirsten, who had Down Syndrome, was Alma's assistant in her art studio at Lark House. After Alma could no longer work at her studio and had to close it Kirsten was taken as an apprentice in the pain clinic. At the end of the novel Irina learned that Alma had put all of the letters that Ichimei had written to her in Kirsten's backpack and had given Kirsten instructions to give them to Irina after Alma died.

Costea and Petruta

Costea and Petruta were the names of Irina's grandparents. Irina lived with her grandparents until she was twelve years of age. After Irina moved to America her grandmother died in just a few months. Her grandfather hung himself because he felt he no longer had anything to live for.

Boyd Anderson

Boyd Anderson was an American soldier with whom Megumi fell in love during her family's time in Topaz. Boyd loved Megumi as well and tried tirelessly to get her to marry him. It was not until she received her education and could assist in births as a midwife that Megumi gave in to his pleading. They had a son whom they named Charles.



James Fukuda

James Fukuda, the middle son of Takao and Heideko Fukuda, was deported back to Japan after he gave undesirable answers to a questionnaire given to the Japanese men at Topaz. It was suspected James answered the questions the way he did because he was offended by the questions because he was an American citizen.

Frank Delillo

Frank Delillo was the doctor at Topaz who took Megumi under his wing as an apprentice in the camp's hospital. Frank Delillo also knew about the relationship between Megumi and Boyd Anderson. He got Megumi passes so she could get through camp check points and rendezvous with Boyd in Delillo's quarters.

Kemi Morita

Kemi Morita was a priestess in the Oomoto faith. The family paid for a ticket for her to come to Takao when he was on his deathbed. The priestess also joined the remaining family members when they dug up the Fukuda family's samurai sword from the Sea Cliff garden.

Jim Robyns

Jim Robyns is the man who was Irina's stepfather. During the two years that she lived with her mother and stepfather Jim abused Irina sexually and sold pictures and videos of her. He was eventually convicted of child prostitution and ordered to serve ten years in jail.

Neko

The cat whom Ichimei gave to Alma to care for when he evacuated San Francisco with his family was named Neko, Japanese for cat. Alma owned a variety of cats during her life. All were named Neko.

Ron Wilkins

Ron Wilkins is the FBI agent who investigated Irina's abuse and eventually came to take her away from her abusive stepfather. He came to visit Irina at Lark House. It was his visit that prompted Catherine Hope to ask Irina what had happened to her in her past.



Delphine Akimura

Delphine Akimura is the Japanese woman whom Ichimei married. Although Delphine had been at Topaz with Ichimei the two had not met each other at that time because Delphine was only a baby.

Charles Fukuda

Charles Fukuda was the oldest son of Takao and Heideko Fukuda. He joined the military and was killed in action in Italy. He was awarded a Purple Heart posthumously.

Nathaniel Belasco

Nathaniel Belasco is Alma's cousin and later her husband. He is the father of Lawrence Franklin Belasco and is also Seth's grandfather. He is the only young person in the Belasco family who really paid attention to Alma when she first came to live with the Belascos at Sea Cliff. He was the one who discovered Alma often spent her nights crying in the closet in her room; he would go to her and provide her comfort.

Nathaniel was different from other boys from the beginning. He was not cruel and violent. In school he was bullied and came home with injuries from fights until Ichimei introduced Nathaniel to Judo and karate, a means by which Nathaniel could protect himself. Nathaniel took lessons from Takao Fukuda.

Nathaniel was a generous man. When he died, hundreds of IOUs, for which he had never called for payment, were found in his house. There were instructions not to request payment from some of Nathaniel's debtors.

Nathaniel married Alma when she confessed to him that she was pregnant. Alma had wanted to get an abortion and Nathaniel had agreed to take her to the clinic she had found to perform the procedure. When he discovered how badly equipped and unsanitary the clinic was Nathaniel decided it would be best for them to get married and let Alma carry the baby to term.

Although it is never specifically stated, it is assumed that Nathaniel died of AIDS. He was homosexual and had a male lover, Lenny Beal, in addition to his wife. During his last days, Alma allowed the man who had been Nathaniel's lover to come and stay with them so that he and Nathaniel could be together.

Nathaniel died from a massive dose of morphine given to him by Alma and Lenny. He was in the final days of his illness. The look in his eyes told his friends his appreciated what they were doing to help put him out of his misery.



Symbols and Symbolism

A Scarab

This ugly diamond and topaz bug was given to Irina by Jacques as a token of his love for her. Because she was not allowed to accept gifts from the residents, Irina gave the piece of jewelry to Voigt.

Silver Framed Photograph

A silver framed photograph of Ichimei was one of only two that Alma had displayed in her apartment at Lark House. It was a symbol of her unending affection for Ichimei. Near the end of the novel Irina discovered taped to the back of the photograph a final letter that Ichimei had written to Alma.

Lime Green Smart Car

Alma bought this car to drive after she moved to Lark House. She wanted it to be small and light so she wouldn't hurt anyone she might accidentally hit with it. It was so small, however, that it did not give Alma enough protection when she had a wreck in it. She died because of the injuries she sustained in that wreck.

A Samurai Sword

This samurai sword owned by Takao was a symbol of his family and his heritage. Its fine workmanship proved he was a member of a distinguished family. In order to keep it safe while he and his family were being held in the concentration camp Isaac Belasco allowed Takao to bury the sword in his garden.

Hundreds of IOUs

After Nathaniel Belasco's death his wife found hundreds of IOUs for which he had never called for payment of and did not wish his family to pursue. This stack of IOUs showed how truly generous Nathaniel was.

A Photograph of the Fukuda Family

This photograph, like others taken of Japanese families while they were being held in the concentration camps, was intended to symbolize how well the people were being cared for in the camps and how happy they were.



A Questionnaire

When James Fukuda answered no to some questions on this questionnaire passed out to the Japanese people being held in American concentration camps, he was deported because he was suspected of being a danger to the United States. James, who was an American citizen by birth, felt insulted by the questionnaire. The questionnaire symbolized how easy it was for the Japanese to offend the Americans, causing the Japanese to be arrested and deported.

Gardenias

Seth and Irina noticed that Alma would receive a box containing three gardenias once a week. They assumed these flowers were from Ichimei and was a symbol of his continued love for her.

A Memorial Plaque

The Belasco family had this memorial plaque erected in France to commemorate the death of Samuel Mandel. However, Samuel had actually survived the plane crash. He later visited the memorial with his sister. The plaque is a symbol of the many unknowns in Alma's life.

Pink Veils

On the last night that Lenny and Alma took a walk together Alma believed she saw a fleeting glimpse of pink veils. The people who lived in Lark House believed this sight was a symbol of Emily, the ghost who was said to take old people away. They also believed the pink veils were a sign that someone was about to die. The sight turned out to be a premonition because Alma died only a few days later.

Kirsten's Backpack

The fact that Alma stored the letters she had gotten from Ichimei in Kirsten's backpack symbolized the trust she had in the girl. It was only after Alma's death that Kirsten gave the letters to Irina as Alma had asked her to do.



Settings

Lark House

Lark House is the name of the senior residence where Alma decided to move after Ichimei's death. A good deal of the present day action of the novel occurs at Lark House. Irina met Alma after Irina was hired to work at Lark House.

Garden at Sea Cliff Mansion

The garden at the Sea Cliff mansion is an important setting in the novel. It was in this garden that Alma and Ichimei first met. It was also in this garden that Takao received permission to bury his family's samurai sword when the Japanese people were forced to evacuate from their home cities and live in camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Port of Danzig

The Port of Danzig is a significant setting because it was at this port that Alma last saw her parents. Her parents sent Alma to the Belascos in America but remained behind in Warsaw. It was suspected they died in the Warsaw ghetto.

Topaz

Topaz was a concentration camp in the desert area of Utah where the Fukuda family was sent when they were evacuated from San Francisco during World War II.

The Armoire

It was in this wardrobe, or armoire, in young Alma's bedroom in the Sea Cliff mansion that she spent her nights crying when she first arrived in California. When Alma was sharing memories about her life with Seth she imagined each year's memories being organized into different colored boxes. In her mind she stored these boxes in that same armoire.

A Guesthouse in Point Reyes

Irina knew from Alma's receipts that she had been staying at a guesthouse in Point Reyes when she went on her secretive trips. She believed that Ichimei was meeting Alma at that guesthouse.



A Toolshed

It was in a toolshed near the house where Irina lived with her mother and stepfather that her stepfather was abusing and taking pictures of his stepdaughter during the abuse.

Martin General Hospital

Alma was taken to Martin General Hospital after her car wreck. It was while sitting with Alma one night that Irina believed that Ichimei had come to visit Alma. She only learned later that Ichimei was dead and could not have visited.



Themes and Motifs

Secrets

Secrets and the revelation of these secrets is an important theme in this novel, as it is the secrets kept by several characters that drive the plot. Alma, Irina and Nathaniel are among the characters who harbor secrets. Once these secrets are divulged the new information changes the way the reader interprets situations presented in earlier parts of the book.

The main character with a secret is Alma. It is her secret love affair with Ichimei that drives the plot of the novel. Although she'd thought she'd kept this part of her life a secret from her grandson, Seth, and Irina they found out about it and drew their own conclusions about Alma. Based on what they knew, both Irina and Seth assumed that Ichimei was still alive and that Alma was sneaking off to see him. They did not realize that Ichimei had died the same year that Alma had decided to move to Lark House and that she had decided to rid herself of her material possessions as a penance for her worldly life of privilege. Another secret that Alma had kept from her family was that her first baby was not Nathaniel's baby but was instead Ichimei's. Because the baby died after Alma had been pregnant with it only five and a half months, no one but Alma and Nathaniel ever knew Ichimei was the father.

Meanwhile, Nathaniel had a secret of his own that he kept even from Alma. He was homosexual. Alma was not aware of his homosexuality or that he had a longtime male lover until Nathaniel was incapacitated by AIDS. Nathaniel's diagnosis of AIDS was another secret that Nathaniel and Alma kept from the family. They chose to tell both family members and friends that Nathaniel was dying of cancer.

Irina's secret adds another element of suspense to the novel. The author hints from the beginning of the novel the Irina suffered some trauma that made it difficult for her to trust people. It was for this reason that she did not warm to Seth as quickly as he wanted her to. It is not until almost the end of the novel that the author began to tell the story of Irina's past. She not only grew up in the poor country of Moldova with her grandparents but when her mother did ask Irina to come to America to live with them, her stepfather abused her. He told her the photos and videos he took of her in sexual positions were private and that he was sending her grandparents money as a bribe to get her to cooperate. It was not until after two years of this abuse that Irina learned her photos were popular on Internet child porn sites and that her stepfather had never sent her grandparents any money as he had promised he would do.

Euthanasia

Euthanasia, the act of intentionally ending one's own life to stop pain and suffering, is another theme in this novel. Several different views of this act of suicide are voiced in



the novel. The circumstances of the novel also leave the reader wondering if Alma's car wreck was indeed an accident or if she was trying to end her own life.

The idea of euthanasia is first mentioned in this novel when Jacques "Frenchie" Devine was found dead. Because the man had just seen the doctor and this doctor had found nothing physical that would have indicated Frenchie would die suddenly, the doctor suggested an autopsy be done. Hans Voigt, the director of Lark House, discouraged the autopsy because he didn't want to take the chance that it would turn out that Frenchie had done something to cause his own death. In a later meeting with his staff after it was discovered one of the residents had received from Thailand the supplies she would need for euthanasia Voigt ordered his staff members they were not to encourage the residents to contemplate killing themselves. He believed if there was a rash of assisted deaths at Lark House it would give the community a bad reputation.

In contrast of Voigt's idea that euthanasia was detestable, Dr. Catherine Hope quietly offered residents advice and supplies to kill themselves. She had been in a climbing accident that left her in pain and unable to care for herself but she still treasured her life and did not want to end it. Because of her experience, however, she could empathize with patients who were hurting badly with no hope of better days.

Alma had her own experience with euthanasia. When her husband Nathaniel was dying of AIDS, she and Nathaniel's partner, Lenny, had suggested to Nathaniel that he consider euthanasia. Nathaniel thanked them for releasing him from his pain before they gave him a massive dose of morphine that ended his life. Similarly, Lenny had come to Alma when he learned he had only about six more months to live because he was suffering with a brain tumor. When the time came, he asked her if she would help him end his life. She agreed.

A question that may be raised in the minds of some readers with the attention given to the act of euthanasia is whether or not Alma's car wreck was intentional. It seems a car wreck would be a terrible way to end one's life but Alma doesn't seem to be the kind of person who would come to another person for help in ending her life. She also wasn't suffering from some painful or debilitating disease. She was facing her own demon that was as bad for her as pain. She did not want to lose her privacy or her self sufficiency. As she had gotten older, she'd become more feeble and had begun having chest pains and confusion. Although Irina had helped her keep these symptoms secret from others, Alma knew there was coming a time when she'd have to make a choice to move to assisted living or move back to Sea Cliff. She had relived her affair with Ichimei and had resent to herself all of the letters he originally wrote to her so she had nothing to which she could look forward. Additionally, her cat who had been her companion for 18 years had died, leaving Alma lonely and sad. All of these facts point to the idea that Alma's car wreck might not have been accidental but instead intentional.



Enduring Love

Enduring love is another major theme in this novel. The novel speaks to the idea that love can last an entire lifetime even though that love might undergo changes and even periods of dormancy through one's life. Characters experiencing this enduring love include Alma, Ichimei, Megumi, Irina, Nathaniel and Seth.

The foremost example of enduring love is that between Ichimei and Alma. Significant in their story, however is that their love might not have endured if they had gotten married. They remained lovers their entire lives with Ichimei's spirit even coming back from the dead to visit Alma in her hospital room just before she died. When faced with the prospect of marrying Ichimei because she was pregnant with his child, Alma could not bring herself to accept the life of relative poverty that she would live if she were to marry the man who she claimed she loved most.

The love between Nathaniel and Alma is another example of enduring love. Even though Nathaniel was aware that he was homosexual, he married Alma to make an honest woman of her and to keep her from having to marry Ichimei or abort her baby. Even though there was no sexual love between Alma and Nathaniel, they remained best friends through their lives from the time when they first met until Nathaniel's death. Even after Nathaniel died Alma claimed that Nathaniel was her guardian angel.

Another case of enduring love identified in the novel is that between Megumi and Boyd Anderson. It is with this relationship that the author plays upon the differences between the two as Megumi was a Japanese American while Boyd was an American. Although Alma and Ichimei were of the same nationalities, that difference between them was not stressed as much as it was between Megumi and Boyd. This could be because Megumi was a resident in the concentration camp of which Boyd was tasked as a guard. The two are different not only because of their cultural differences but also their differences in rank. Megumi refused to marry Boyd while her father was still alive because she knew it would finish her father's destruction. He would never be able to accept that his daughter had married a man who had once held the family prisoner. Megumi's mother was not happy with her decision to marry Boyd and referred to her son-in-law as the white devil. She refused to speak to him until after the two had their first child whom they named Charles.

Finally, Seth professed an enduring love for Irina. Even though she was very different from him and his family, and from the girlfriends he'd had in the past, Seth was infatuated with her. He waited patiently even as they made minute steps toward a physical relationship. Irina eventually rewarded him for his patience by telling him what had happened in her past and agreeing to work with him.

Social Class

The similarities and differences in people from different social classes is an important theme in this novel. This theme is demonstrated most clearly in the relationship



between Seth and Irina but can also be seen in other places in the novel. When Alma first considered that her grandson might become romantically involved with Irina she laughed at the way her family would react to the girl. Seth was a highly paid lawyer who had never known want or need. Irina was an emigrant from Moldova whose small body and delicate bone structure were the results of the poverty and malnourishment of her childhood. Even in America Irina had to work three jobs to keep herself in a rent stabilized room in an apartment building that Seth referred to as a pigsty. He believed it was his job to rescue Irina from her life of poverty.

Other differences in social class are demonstrated in the relationships between the Americans and the Japanese. Because the Japanese who emigrated to America could not own property and many could not even speak English, they could not get good paying jobs. They remained in the lower social classes in the United States even though they worked hard to better themselves.

Isaac was an ambassador for these Japanese people and other people of lower social classes who were struggling during the Great Depression. It was because he wanted to put people to work and help them elevate themselves that he hired Takao to create the garden at Sea Cliff. Although the two had very different backgrounds, Isaac even found a way to help the Fukuda family improve themselves by opening and eventually owning their own flower shop and nursery.

Sadly, even though her uncle had helped the Fukuda family to better itself, it still wasn't enough for Alma. When she had the opportunity she could not bring herself to marry Ichimei because of the wealth she would give up. Even as an old woman Alma admitted that her prejudice of social class was one she'd never completely managed to get over.

Materialism

Alma's act of giving up her material possessions at the end of her life as a form of penance as well as her unwillingness to part with her life of possessions when she got pregnant with Ichimei's baby are both aspects of this novel that add to the theme of materialism. The lesson to be learned from the book seems to be that material possessions will weigh one down and keep them more anxious about losing what they have.

Alma's own experience when she got pregnant by Ichimei and had to consider what her life would be like if she chose to marry him demonstrates how hard it can be for a person who has always lived life surrounded by material possessions to give up these things. When Alma realized how unhappy she would be living without the possessions and privilege to which she was accustomed, she was ashamed of herself but at that time her shame did not bother her enough to make a change in her life. It was only after she was much older that Alma freed herself of her possessions and began trying to learn who she was without the baggage of her "things."



Styles

Point of View

This story is told from the third person point of view of an omniscient narrator. Even though Alma is the main character of the novel, there is no particular focus on her. Her story is foremost in the novel but the stories of the other characters are also told by the narrator using as much detail and color as Alma's story is told. Even Lenny's dog, Sophia, and Alma's cat, Neko, are characters worthy of having their stories told by the narrator. The narrator knows all of the emotions and thoughts of all of the characters as well as background information on all these characters. The narrator lays out all of the stories of all of these characters. The story is not told to anyone in particular but rather to a general audience.

Language and Meaning

There is nothing particularly significant in the topic of language or meaning. Although it is understood that the Japanese characters, like Takao and Heideko, probably didn't speak very good English, there is no attempt made to copy their speech patterns in dialogue. In fact there are no spots in the novel where Takao actually has a spoken line. His responses to what is happening around him are described in minute detail by the narrator. Even at the point that Takao was finally offered the right to become a citizen the author does not include the words he used to curse the United States, she merely writes "When Heideko tried to get him to accompany her to register with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, she ended up going on her own, her husband's only reply was to curse the United States" (125).

The author does delve into the facts and details of circumstances and surroundings very thoroughly. Even in these descriptions she uses few literary techniques, like metaphors, to aid her descriptions. She chooses instead to describe her characters and settings in a straightforward manner with little ornamentation.

Structure

This 322 page novel is divided into 31 different chapters. The chapters are about 10 pages long. The novel is told in the past tense but is not told in a linear fashion. The story jumps back and forth through time from the early 1900s when Takao Fukuda emigrated to the United States until 2013 when Alma died. Sometimes it is hard for the reader to keep up with the point in time in which things are happening as they are described in the novel. The timeline of events is also hard to keep up with, especially when it comes to the relationship between Ichimei and Alma.

Also significant about the structure of the novel is the letters that Ichimei wrote to Alma that are scattered throughout the novel. These letters are included in Chapters 4, 10,



13, 16, 18, 21, 23, 24, 28, 30 and 31. The letters are significant in the structure of the novel because they give Ichimei a voice in the story. They also give the reader more information about significant events brought up in the chapter in which each letter is included. For instance, in one chapter Megumi's relationship with Boyd is discussed. In Ichimei's letter he acknowledges that Megumi and Boyd did get married. It is also the final letter from Ichimei, the one that closes the book, that helps the reader understand at last why Alma decided to go live at Lark House.

A good deal of the novel is expository with much less emphasis on dialogue. The author chooses to tell the bulk of the story through long descriptive passages while the dialogue between the characters is generally used to convey facts and information from one character to another.



Quotes

She could not have imagined she would find a perfect niche for herself in that senior residence, or that over the next three years she would come to be as happy as in her childhood, before fate took a hand.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote indicates that Irina would come to find happiness at Lark House but also hints at some dark secret in her past from which she had been running.

The old folks in the home were conclusive proof that age, despite all its limitations, does not stop one from having fun and taking part in the hubbub of life.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 34)

Importance: Although they were old, the people at Lark House were still lively and enjoyed taking part in all that life had to offer. This quote sums up the attitude of Lark House.

Alma laughed to herself when she thought how the family would react if Seth, the heir to the Belasco dynasty, were to get together with an immigrant who lived by caring for old people and washing dogs.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 20)

Importance: This quote speaks to the theme of social class, a theme that is important in the novel. Alma wondered how her wealthy, affluent relatives would react to Irina who had to work as a dog groomer in order to make ends meet.

According to Seth, early in 2010 his grandmother’s personality underwent a complete change in the space of two hours. Although she had been a successful artist and someone who always fulfilled her obligations, she suddenly cut herself off from the world, family, and friends, shutting herself away in an old people’s home that was beneath her and deciding, in her daughter-in-law Doris’s opinion, to dress like a Tibetan refugee.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 7)

Importance: Seth had told Irina how Alma had changed her entire personality within the course of two hours and decided to live at Lark House. No one in the family had any idea what had prompted her decision.

They listened for another couple of nights and were able to confirm that for some unknown reason the girl had calmed down, and not only slept the whole night but had begun to eat like any normal child. Alma had not forgotten her parents or her brother, and still wanted the family to be reunited as soon as possible, but she was running out of tears and was starting to enjoy her burgeoning friendship with the two people who were to become her life’s only loves: Nathaniel Belasco and Ichimei Fukuda.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 18)



Importance: It was because of her developing friendships with Nathaniel and Ichimei that Alma stopped crying at night. These friendships would last through the rest of their lives.

The Germans had occupied Warsaw, and four hundred thousand Jews were crammed into a ghetto of 1.3 square miles. They had learned from Samuel Mendel in London, where he was an RAF pilot, that their relatives were among them.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 12)

Importance: Although he didn't tell Alma, Isaac learned from Samuel that Alma and Samuel's parents were among those who had been arrested and forced to live in the ghetto in Warsaw.

But Alma Belasco never fit into that category; she didn't need looking after. On the contrary, Irina felt taken care of by her and enjoyed the role of helpless niece that had been allotted to her.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph 21)

Importance: Irina believed all of the residents of Lark House needed her to take care of them. Alma was the exception to this rule because Irina felt it was Alma who took care of her.

When Isaac insisted, Takao asked a special favor of him: to allow him to bury the Fukuda sword in the garden at Sea Cliff. He had managed to hide it from the agents who raided his house, but it wasn't safe.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 9 paragraph 13)

Importance: Isaac Belasco demonstrated his great affection for Takao Fukuda when he allowed Takao to hide his family's samurai sword by burying it in the garden at Sea Cliff.

The families gave themselves up because there was no alternative and because by so doing they thought they were demonstrating their loyalty toward the United States and their repudiation of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. This was their contribution to the war effort, the leaders of the Japanese community said, and very few voices were raised against them.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 10 paragraph 1)

Importance: The Fukudas and the other Japanese did not argue with their orders to evacuate to concentration camps because they believed they demonstrating loyalty by doing as they were told.

Thanks to her moonlike face and the delicacy with which she moved through the world, Megumi could have had any of the most sought-after young men at Topaz, but she felt the same forbidden attraction for the guard, and also struggled with the monstrosity of racism, praying to the heavens that the war would come to an end and her family return to San Francisco so that she could tear this sinful temptation from her soul.”



-- Narrator (Chapter 12 paragraph 2)

Importance: Megumi knew that a relationship with an American soldier would never work but she could not deny that she had feelings for Boyd just as he had believed he had fallen in love with her.

When, as he always did, Isaac examined the drawing, he pointed out to Alma the irony that those young men were willing to risk their lives defending the interests of a country that was holding their families in concentration camps."

-- Narrator (Chapter 12 paragraph 4)

Importance: When looking at one of Ichimei's drawings, he noted to Alma how ironic it was that the young Japanese men were willing to go into battle to defend America even though the Americans were treating the Japanese unfairly.

For thirty years he had wanted to have the same rights as an American, and now that he had the chance, all he wanted to do was to return to Japan, his vanquished homeland."

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 2)

Importance: By the time Takao was finally able to apply for American citizenship that country had taken so much from him that he was no longer interested in being associated with that country.

If none of the methods he had employed to locate Alma's parents had met with any success, and if Samuel's plane had crashed, it was reasonable to assume that all three were dead, but until there was irrefutable proof, Isaac intended to spare his niece all that pain."

-- Narrator (Chapter 14 paragraph 1)

Importance: Even though Isaac suspected that the other three members of Alma's immediate family were dead, he didn't tell her because he didn't want to add to her pain.

It was when he was showing her his gardening books that the idea of creating the Belasco Foundation occurred to him. They spent months going through different possibilities together until the idea took shape, and it was Alma, who by then was thirteen, who thought of creating gardens in the city's poorest neighborhoods."

-- Narrator (Chapter 16 paragraph 20)

Importance: It was when Isaac and Alma were collaborating over some gardening books that Alma came up with the idea that the Belasco Foundation use its money to create gardens and green spaces.

I'm discovering who I am without all my ornaments and accessories. It's quite a slow process, but a very useful one. Everybody ought to do the same at the end of their life."

-- Alma (Chapter 18 paragraph 10)



Importance: Alma told Lenny that she had decided to live at Lark House as a sort of penance for life of privilege and riches.

Lenny's declaration did not surprise Irina. Death by their own hand was discussed quite naturally among the most lucid of the Lark House residents."

-- Narrator (Chapter 18 paragraph 42)

Importance: Irina was not surprised when she learned about Lenny's plans to kill himself when the symptoms of his brain tumor became too bad for him to handle. Many of the elderly talked openly about euthanasia.

The one thing she never talked about was Ichimei, unaware that behind her back Irina and Seth were investigating this most precious and secret aspect of her existence, the one thing she could not reveal, because if she did Ichimei would vanish, and with him her only reason to continue living."

-- Narrator (Chapter 19 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is interesting because it foreshadows the fact that Ichimei was no longer alive during the time that Seth and Irina believed she was making trips to see him. The quote can be interpreted in two different ways, first that if Seth and Irina were to find out about Ichimei, Alma would have to admit to him that Ichimei was no longer alive and her fantasy of seeing him would end. In the second, if someone were to learn about her affair with Ichimei, Ichimei would stop the affair because they would be afraid his wife would find out about them.

We all have demons in the dark recesses of our soul, but if we bring them out into the light, they grow smaller and weaker, they fall silent and eventually leave us in peace."

-- Catherine Hope (Chapter 20 paragraph 40)

Importance: Cathy tried to persuade Irina to tell her what happened to her in her past that hurt her so badly.

This was what brought Radmila face-to-face with what had been going on in her house for more than two years, although she had refused to see it, and this was how Alice learned that millions of men all over the world had viewed her in secret 'games' with her stepfather."

-- Narrator (Chapter 22 paragraph 67)

Importance: Radmila insisted that her daughter be allowed to stay in the room when FBI agent Wilkins showed her the pictures that Radmila's husband had been taking of her daughter. It was in this way that Radmila learned about what her husband had been doing to Irina the two years she'd been living with them.

It was from her that Elisabeta learned not only that her grandparents had died but that the money remittances had never been sent. Jim Robyns was sentenced to ten years in jail with no prospect of parole."

-- Narrator (Chapter 22 paragraph 72)



Importance: A juvenile judge was the one who gave Elisabeta (Irina) the saddest news of her life, that her grandparents had died and that her stepfather had never sent them the money Elisabeta was “earning” during their games together.

She adored him but knew that the disadvantages of poverty drove out love, because faced with the choice between a life of economic hardship within a Japanese community she had nothing in common with, or of continuing to be protected in her own environment, her fear of the unknown won out; she was ashamed of her own weakness, Ichimei deserved unconditional love, he was a wonderful man, a sage, a saint, a pure soul, a delicate, considerate lover in whose arms she felt blessed.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 23 paragraph 4)

Importance: Even though Alma loved Ichimei she knew that her love for him could not last if she were to marry him.

Alma admitted to herself that her greatest prejudice was that of social class, which she never managed to overcome.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 23 paragraph 28)

Importance: This quote is significant because one of the major themes in this novel is that of social class. Alma admitted she was more prejudicial to social class than any other dividing factor.

Deep down, he was happy to see the union of the two people he loved most in the world apart from his wife.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 4)

Importance: Although many people believed the marriage between Nathaniel and Alma was incestuous, Isaac was secretly pleased that these two people, both of whom he loved deeply would be together.

Seth had asked Irina to give up her job at Lark House and leave her room (which he called the mousetrap) to go and live with him permanently, but she kept one foot in Berkeley so as to avoid the snare of dependency, which she feared as much as the idea of moving to the second level at Lark House scared Alma.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 25 paragraph 4)

Importance: In this quote the author draws a comparison between Irina’s fear of being dependent upon Seth to Alma’s fear of having to move out of independent living at Lark House. For Irina, it would a good thing for her to be able to allow herself to depend on Seth while Alma saw her coming need to be dependent on someone else as a sign of her failure because of old age. She would never be able to regain her independence.

Apart from Kirsten, that animal was the only being who stroked her.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 25 paragraph 5)



Importance: Alma's cat was the only creature, besides Kirsten, that Alma allowed to be physically affectionate with her.

He wept, thinking he was doing so for the dead child and for Alma, but in fact he was doing so for himself, for his constrained, conventional life, the weight of the responsibilities he could never free himself from, the loneliness that had oppressed him since birth, the love he longed for but would never know, the marked cards he had been dealt, all the underhanded tricks destiny had played on him."

-- narrator (Chapter 27 paragraph 10)

Importance: The reader assumes that Nathaniel cried because he did not want to marry Alma and felt cheated out of discovering his own true love. In reality, Nathaniel realized he was gay and knew he'd never be able to openly have the type of relationship he wanted to have.

Why be so attached to what we are bound to lose anyway? I suppose I mean youth, which has been so present in our conversations."

-- Ichimei (Chapter 28 paragraph 30)

Importance: In one of his letters to Alma Ichimei wondered why people fought so hard against the loss of their youth, especially since there was nothing they could do to stop it from disappearing.

Alma pointed out to Lenny a fleeting glimpse of pink veils in the park, but it was growing dark, and possibly it wasn't Emily heralding disaster, but a mirage like so many others at Lark House."

-- Narrator (Chapter 30 paragraph 46)

Importance: This sighting of Emily's pink veils was a foreshadowing of things to come because Alma had a car wreck in which she suffered fatal injuries just a few days later.

Faced with such a proof of friendship, she realized how deeply cherished she was, as she had been during her early childhood. The monsters of her past were beginning to recede, and her stepfather's videos, which had exerted such frightening power over her, were somehow reduced to their true dimensions. They seemed like bleak carcasses fed on by anonymous scavengers without identity or soul, now powerless."

-- Narrator (Chapter 31 paragraph 43)

Importance: It was when Kirsten gave Irina the letters that Ichimei had written to Alma that Irina realized how much Alma really did care about her. It was this acknowledgment of her worth as a person that helped Irina slay the darkness that had haunted her past.

My grandmother collected Ichimei's letters her whole life through, all those that came to Sea Cliff, where she always lived. Then, when she moved to Lark House, she began sending the letters to herself every so often, one by one, in the yellow envelopes you and I saw. She received and read them, treasuring them as if they were new."

-- Seth (Chapter 31 paragraph 55)



Importance: It was after Alma died that Seth and Irina realized that Alma had been sending herself the letters that Ichimei had written her over the years and had in that way been reliving their love affair.

He died around the same time my grandmother went to live at Lark House. Possibly the two things are connected in some way. I think that letter dated 2010, the last one Alma received, was his good-bye.”

-- Seth (Chapter 31 paragraph 65)

Importance: Seth told Irina that there was no way she had seen Ichimei in Alma’s hospital room because he had died several years before her wreck. He believed his grandmother’s move to Lark House might have been connected to Ichimei’s death.